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The New Orleans

Imperative

With Dr. Raynard Sanders

The weekly radio show
about New Orleans public education

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Why the educational reforms in New Orleans public schools have failed and will never work.

Dr. Raynard Sanders

The education reforms of the New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) is affirmed in the media as the national model for turning around failing urban school districts; however, the reforms has been a nightmare for the very children it was supposed serve.

Post-Hurricane Katrina the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) took over more than 107 public schools in New Orleans claiming they were failing. Post –Katrina Education Reform has drastically rebuilt the public education system into practically an all charter system creating the largest percentage of charter schools than any city in the country. In doing these reforms the state attracted more than three billion dollars from the philanthropic community, charter school proponents, foreign countries and the federal government to rebuild New Orleans public schools. Over the last six years numerous reports have come out citing the RSD with unprecedented success while proclaiming it as the national model for turning around urban school districts. Despite these reports of the miracle in New Orleans the realities are that the reform school district in New Orleans (Recovery School District) is one of the worst performing school districts in the state of Louisiana. In its recent assessment the Louisiana State Department of Education ranked the Recovery School District 69th out of 70 academically of school districts in Louisiana. Despite the billions of dollars and all of the media spin and claims from state education officials *the education reforms in New Orleans has failed.*

Ironically, the obvious changes in the public education landscape that the reformers said were needed (market approach to public education system, charter schools and school choice) is not the reason for this failure. The reason for the failure is more deeply rotted in New Orleans' history where its leadership by policy and practice reflected a narrow-minded commitment to Separate and Unequal schools. New Orleans cannot seem to overcome its belief that it should

not provide quality education to all children regardless of race and class. Unfortunately, the leadership in New Orleans and the state of Louisiana believe that inequity is the foundation for which our public education should be built. The leaders who support this kind of thinking are so intoxicated with their ignorance and blindness that they have no problem in providing unequal funding, inadequate facilities for the children they have determined as less desirable. Meanwhile in the present educational reforms the LDE have quietly disenfranchised them from the public education process.

The author David McCullough stated that “history is who we are and why we are the way we are”. When you look at New Orleans history it helps us to understand New Orleans unconditional historic commitment to inequity; this belief has been a part of practice of public education for years. In 1902, New Orleans Public School Assistant Superintendent Nicholas Bauer wrote in a report to the Superintendent Warren Easton that clearly explains New Orleans historic commitment to inequity:

...to teach the negro is a different problem. His natural ability is that of low character and is possible to bring him to a certain level beyond which is impossible to carry him. That point is the fifth grade of our schools.

While this statement may be startling to some, it characterizes the senseless logic for creating unequal schools for African American children that have been labeled as uneducable or undesirable. When Assistant Superintendent Bauer specifically referred to the race to justify the school district’s bias, the politically correct identification of the undesirable student in 2012 has expanded to race and class. These kinds of beliefs and practices resulted in the age-old fight of access to quality education for all children and created the environment that provided substandard education to generations of children. That fight is going on today as parents of special needs children filed a class action through the Southern Poverty Law Center against the Louisiana State Department of Education for allowing charter schools to deny access to their children. It is this kind of thinking that allows state officials to defy the No Child Left Behind federal policy by not offering school choice to the thousands of students in failing schools to attend passing schools. It is this kind of thinking that state education officials allow charter schools to deny access to neighborhood schools because they don’t meet their admission standards.

In a report written in 2010 by the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race and Poverty, it states that rebuilding of the public school system in post-Katrina New Orleans has produced a five “tiered” system of public schools in which not every student in the city receives the same quality education. The “tiered” system of public schools in the city of New Orleans sorts white students and a relatively small share of students of color into selective schools while steering the majority of low-income students of color to high-poverty non-charter schools.

Dr. Kristen Buras, Professor at Georgia State University in her article *Race, Charter Schools and Conscious Capitalism: On the Spatial Politics of Whiteness as Property (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)* in the Harvard Educational Review in 2011 argues that:

New Orleans charters are less about responding to the needs of racially oppressed communities and more about reconstruction of the new newly governed South - one in which white entrepreneurs (with black allies) capitalize on black schools and neighborhoods by obtaining public monies to build and manage charter schools.

The education reforms in New Orleans have boldly reestablished the Separate and Unequal Schools system that it ironically defines as a good school system. However, LDE cannot seem to understand or refuse to understand that good school systems provide an equal opportunity for *all* children to learn in an *optimum* learning environment. Good school systems do not put five and six year old children on school buses for a three to four hour bus ride to and from school while passing up dozens of charter schools that they cannot get into because they don't meet their admission requirements. Good school systems vigorously practice excellence for all schools; they do not extend the contracts or give more schools to failing charter schools. Good school systems use equity and excellence as the standard for making all its decisions. Good school systems do not sacrifice equity and excellence for narrow minded thinking around race and class. Good school systems most importantly understand that you cannot have excellence schools without equitable schools; one cannot exist without the other.

The systemic changes needed to create a quality education for all children will never happen in New Orleans until the leadership and citizens overcome the biases of race and class that have historically kept our city from moving forward.

Raynard Sanders, Ed.D. is an educational consultant, researcher and radio host, his program The New Orleans Imperative is the only weekly radio show in New Orleans that focuses on public education. For more info please visit www.theneworleansimperative.org. Dr. Sanders is also a contributor to Research on Reforms for more info visit www.researchonreforms.org