



What Should We Really Learn From New Orleans After the Storm? A Q&A With NEPC Fellow Bruce Baker



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Since its publication in July, a [policy brief](#) on New Orleans schools has attracted a great deal of attention from [journalists](#), [charter school supporters](#), and [skeptics](#) of the post-Katrina reforms.

Authored by Doug Harris and Matthew Larsen of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University, *The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina Market-Based School Reforms on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes* finds that the post-storm reforms led to improvements in test scores, high school graduation rates, and postsecondary outcomes. These reforms entailed transforming most of the district's schools into charters.

In August, Harris addressed the report and its methodology in an [extensive Q&A](#) with the NEPC newsletter.

For this installment of the newsletter, NEPC returns to the Harris and Larsen report in an interview with [Bruce Baker](#), NEPC Fellow and professor in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Baker critiqued the report in “What Should We Really Learn From New Orleans After *the Storm?*”, published by the Network for

In the Q&A below, Baker discusses that critique with NEPC.

Q: *Harris and Larsen downplay the likelihood that post-Katrina changes to New Orleans students, families and neighborhoods may have caused part (or all) of the outcome improvements found by their research team. You disagree. In your critique, you make a case that demographic changes in particular were substantial, concluding, “In summary, by many measures, things look better now in New Orleans than they did before the storm.” Do you think there is sufficient data and other evidence to resolve the disagreement? What would it take, in terms of further analysis, to attribute none/some/most of the measured improvements to demographic changes?*

Baker: I guess I’m just not sure it can be done. There are so many layers of disruptive change to housing stock, gradients of child and family poverty, the spatial distribution of poverty and housing stock and so on. Some things are just too complex to parse cleanly. This is one of those cases. There’s just way too much that went on – way too much that changed – as a result of “the storm.” Too many unmeasurable, unobservable changes. The only way to capture them is with a single event “Katrina” dummy variable, absorbing all of the observables and unobservables and at the same time, washing away any of the reform effects.

Q: *Regarding the increased spending of almost \$1,400 annually per student, Harris and Larsen note that this probably helped, but you argue that it likely played a larger role than they acknowledge in their report. Did spending increase enough, and did concentrated poverty decrease enough, to adequately explain all of the improvements in educational outcomes identified in the Harris and Larsen study? More pointedly, do you leave open the possibility that the market-based reforms in NOLA may also be a cause of those improvements?*

Baker: In my view it’s really that combination of a) disrupting concentrated poverty and b) increasing resources that likely played the biggest role. I might argue that the introduction of certain reforms, including sending kids all over the city, and increasing administrative complexities and redundancies actually marginally reduced the effectiveness (efficiency) of the additional funding. Of course, one additional advantage was the reduction of labor costs due to large scale replacement of the labor force. This makes the post-Katrina dollar go a little further (in staffing ratios), but that’s a temporary effect. Not sustainable.

I do leave open the possibility that some of the schools which were introduced during the reform period did have substantive positive effects on measured student outcomes. But a) we can’t really discern how much and b) this is about specific schools which may have had positive effects – within the reform mix/ blender. It’s not about the “reforms” which are hard to define as any specific treatment which might affect those measured outcomes. It’s about the package of schools, programs and services which emerged under the reform model, but might not emerge under a similarly structured reform model in other cities under other conditions.

Q: *On page 16 of your critique, you write that your Figure 5 “shows that the share of chil-*

dren attending schools that have greater than 90% low-income children initially plummeted quite significantly, but have since rebounded.” In fact, the rates now appear to be higher than they were pre-Katrina. Wouldn’t that tend to support the idea that the current population of students is actually more disadvantaged than the pre-Katrina population? How difficult is it for researchers (and readers) to agree on a fair counterfactual and complete control variables for these analyses?

Baker: Here, my analysis is also hampered by the inability to identify the gradients of economic disadvantage as reported in the Brookings study. Yes, by these cut points on income, the levels of low-income kids have rebounded to marginally higher than pre-Katrina levels. But the findings of higher outcomes are over the period where those levels were on the rebound, but were still generally lower than pre-Katrina levels.

I think many of us would agree that it would be useful to have finer grained data on income status of kids and families and neighborhood and classroom peer concentrations of those kids. But we don’t have that. The disagreement here lies in whether and to what extent we (I versus Doug and colleagues) think it’s problematic that the measures are imprecise and incomplete. I think it’s a major problem in isolating “reform” effects, but the authors of the NOLA studies seem to downplay that.

Q: *You make the point (based on earlier research of the Tulane team) that much of the additional funding went toward transportation and administrative salaries rather than toward employees (e.g., teachers) with direct contact with students. Couldn’t this help make the case that funding is NOT what led to improved outcomes, especially if the funding went to resources that one might not expect to substantially improve student outcomes?*

Baker: My argument is that the funding may have had even more positive effects, had more of that funding gone to classroom teachers and other instructional resources. In fact, the infusion of funding coupled with the reforms may have led to a less efficient infusion of funding. But we have no way to know what would have happened had more of the funding been spent traditionally.

Q: *Most of the philanthropic resources provided for NOLA were likely one-time or otherwise temporary grants that will be (or already have been) spent out after a couple of years. How should research and researchers account for this sort of short-term infusion? To what extent should the temporary nature of the spending be a concern for those hoping for improvements in NOLA schools?*

Baker: Researchers need to not only measure the magnitude of additional investments, but also track the changes to core resource levels/allocations over time. For example, how did the competitiveness of employee wages change over time? How did staffing ratios change over time? It is less likely that short-term infusions of philanthropic dollars have had persistent effects on wages and staffing ratios. Unlikely that these funds shifted wages and staffing ratios to a new equilibrium and more likely that these dollars went into consulting contracts and other start-up expenses.

Q: *There are straightforward mechanisms by which added resources and changed demo-*

graphics would contribute meaningfully to the measured improvement. But if the market-based reforms did in fact contribute meaningfully to the measured improvement, could you offer any informed speculation about how or why that may have happened? Harris has suggested, for example, that performance may have benefitted simply by the district ridding itself of a dysfunctional bureaucracy and otherwise moribund operation.

Baker: Again, I don't think it has so much to do with "market-based reforms" as it does with the mix of providers who may have entered this particular market, at this time, under these conditions. It's the individual providers, and the aggregate of them that have the measured effects – not the market mechanism or governance structure. We have no way to know if we provided a similar "market-based" governance structure elsewhere whether similar quality providers would enter that market and whether they would have access to similar quality labor at a competitive price. There were many unique conditions in place in NOLA, including an "all-hands-on-deck" national interest in saving a beloved, culturally unique American city. Clearly, the provision of reasonable funding levels encouraged participation of high-quality charter management companies, unlike what's happened in cities like Detroit or Memphis, where some high-profile charter operators have jumped ship due to paltry funding levels.

Harris and colleagues note the interest among bright college grads to pursue employment in NOLA charter schools. The draw of Detroit, or Memphis hasn't quite been the same.

NOLA may indeed have been a corrupt bureaucracy prior to the storm and may not have leveraged additional resources effectively or efficiently. I don't know – empirically – whether it was or not. And Doug Harris' claims in his report(s) have done little to convince me one way or the other. It's really easy to chastise any poor American city as corrupt and inefficient. I think the authors had a little more obligation to prove that – and there are relevant methods for doing so.

Q: *For researchers, the discussions that have occurred since the release of the Harris and Larsen study is a healthy part of the knowledge-building exercise. But for policymakers and others, the back-and-forth might feed the dismissive reaction that "research can be made to say anything." How would you respond to those who have that reaction?*

Baker: To me, the message here for policymakers is that caution is warranted in drawing any policy conclusions from such a unique set of circumstances. This doesn't negate the usefulness of other policy research which is better able to establish counterfactuals and isolate treatments and their effects. But the NOLA situation is just too unique and there's just too much that went on to make any legitimate inferences about how to achieve similar changes to student outcomes in other U.S. cities. "The storm" as treatment is just too dramatic – too multifaceted – and most importantly an event that from an ethical standpoint is not something we should ever strive to replicate. For that matter, we also need to consider more carefully and define more precisely those "treatments" over which we did have control – the actual schools, models, programs and services that emerged after the storm – and not some broadly conceived "package of market-based reforms."

Q: *I believe that only the Tulane researchers have access to the data set. Are there addi-*

tional analyses that you would encourage them to carry out?

Baker: I'm not convinced that the data available have sufficient additional precision to answer any more useful policy questions. Perhaps more importantly, the uniqueness of the policy context, conditions and changes induced by "the storm" will always severely limit any policy implications for other settings. One thing that might be worth exploring is the heterogeneity of student outcomes across different school models, programs and services that emerged across the city.

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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