



New Report Questions the Claimed Success of New Orleans' Charter School Reform



A new [report](#) published by the [National Center for Charter School Accountability](#), a project of the nonprofit, Network for Public Education, critiques and adds context to a June 2025 [policy brief](#) that found that the transformation of New Orleans into an all-charter school district led to large improvements in test scores and graduation rates.

Authored by NEPC Fellow [Kristen Buras](#) of the New Orleans-based [Urban South Grassroots Research Collective](#), the new report is entitled, *The Stories Behind the Statistics: Why a Report on “Large Achievement Gains” in Charter Schools Harms New Orleans’ Black Students*. It raises questions about the brief’s underlying data while also sharing additional qualitative research results.

“Two decades after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans stands as a warning—not a model,” Buras concludes. The “firsthand testimony of students and parents on their charter school experiences, she writes, “reveals the inadequacies of statistical data presented in isolation from the lived realities of day-to-day life in New Orleans charter schools.” She points, for

example, to the “punitive culture” in many of these schools, “that prioritizes discipline over students’ well-being and development.”

New Orleans was converted to an all-charter school system after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005.

The policy brief that Buras critiques is titled, *The New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms: 20 Years of Lessons*. It was co-authored by NEPC Fellow [Doug Harris](#) of Tulane and published by a Tulane-based institute that he founded, the [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans](#) (ERA-New Orleans, or simply “ERA”). The report received considerable attention, including from NPR’s [Morning Edition](#) and from an [NEPC newsletter](#). Although the ERA report included cautions about the transferability of the NOLA findings to other districts (e.g., the additional funding and the very low starting point on the outcome measures), those cautions [were lost](#) on charter-school advocates.

Dr. Buras’ new report goes beyond those cautions, however. She raises questions about ERA’s conclusion that “New Orleans schools ranked at the bottom of the state when Katrina hit, but have moved up to the middle on most outcomes,” noting that the state’s accountability system standards have changed in the past two decades. She also raises questions about the reliability and validity of the data underlying the report, pointing in particular to “allegations, lawsuits, and violations involving grade-fixing and mismanagement in the New Orleans charter school sector.” This occurred, Buras writes, in an environment in which the state was not adequately monitoring or evaluating charter schools.

“In the end, academic fraud at the charter school level should not be overlooked for its part in producing ‘gains’ in New Orleans,” she writes. “Until such allegations are thoroughly investigated, litigated, or prevented through appropriate state oversight, the numbers coming out of New Orleans should be regarded with great caution.”

After raising these questions about the usefulness of the data analyzed by ERA, Buras points to a very different source of evidence. She rounds out her report with results of her own qualitative and historic research, which draws upon documents and interviews with alumni, parents, and educators associated with New Orleans high schools both before and after Hurricane Katrina. Part of this research also appeared in her new

book, *What We Stand to Lose: Black Teachers, the Culture They Created, and the Closure of a New Orleans High School*.

“The testimonies of black students and parents expose a culture of alienation and control that contrasts sharply with the supportive, intergenerational, community-centered ethos of New Orleans’ historic public schools,” she writes. “In these students’ stories, we see the limits of a system driven by metrics rather than meaning and compliance rather than care.”

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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