Wilson Center
Program on America and the Global Economy

MAKING A SUCCESS OF EVERY SCHOOL:

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21st CENTURY

Paul Vallas with Tressa Pankovits

Edited with an Introduction by Kent Hughes

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INTRODUCTION

AMERICA faces an education challenge. While America's universities lead the world, its K-12 system has fallen badly behind. Compared with its advanced economy competitors, American 15-year-olds rank 17th in science and 25th in mathematics. When major emerging market economies are included, the American performance looks even worse.

The Wilson Center is delighted that its Distinguished Scholar, Paul Vallas, has agreed to put on paper his approach to reform that he has developed over his years leading the public schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, the Recovery School District in New Orleans, and most recently, Bridgeport, Connecticut. In preparing this paper, he has been ably assisted by Tressa Pankovits, who has worked with Vallas on a number of projects including his international initiatives. She brings to this collaboration an extensive background in writing, television journalism and work as a litigating attorney. Both Vallas and Pankovits stressed the valuable support provided by Kevin Shafer, a Teach for America alumnus and Deputy Chief of Staff with the Bridgeport Public School System, and express appreciation for the research provided by Dr. Kenneth Wong, the first Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Educational Policy and Chairman of the Education Department at Brown University. The full Vallas and Pankovits biographies can be found in the Appendix.

Paul Vallas, the noted education reformer, has developed an approach that he is convinced can make any school a success. Needed and positive change can occur in both traditional public schools and publicly funded charter schools. He moves beyond the debate over the value of charter schools to focus on the key elements that will make any school a quality educational institution.

Vallas' thinking on school reform has emerged from years of experience in first working on the financial side of city management and then as superintendent of the aforementioned school systems. In recent years, he has

added an international dimension to his experience by working with the Inter-American Development Bank on school reform in Chile and Haiti—in both cases responding in the context of the disruption caused by major earthquakes.

In spelling out the need for reform, Vallas points to the way in which today's curriculum has lagged behind the communication tools that society and many of the students are already using outside the classroom. Vallas also points to an added challenge: how growing income inequality in the United States has contributed to inadequate early childhood education. As he notes, so much of early brain development occurs in the first three years of life, while Head Start and similar programs generally do not begin until age four.

Vallas is very aware of how rapidly technology and the world of work are changing. In his view, schools "must create an environment and experience comparable to the jobs of tomorrow." He stresses that schools must be flexible enough to adapt to conditions that are likely to change in ways that may not be easily foreseeable.

In Vallas' view, everything should be focused on school improvement. In addition to a flexible structure, Vallas emphasizes the importance of financial stability so that schools can introduce improvements one year, without fearing that they will be pushed aside by tightened resources in the next.

Vallas also emphasizes what many would call "pragmatic partnerships." He sees forging agreements with universities and colleges as an effective way of attracting people who might not have otherwise considered entering the teaching profession. Partnerships with local technical colleges can also offer students exposure to the skills they will need in the 21st century.

In the second half of his paper, Vallas turns to his extensive experience in the Recovery School District, which took over most public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans and in a more limited fashion, other failing schools in Louisiana. During Vallas' tenure, there was a proliferation of charter schools—publicly funded schools that are independent of a central school administration.. By the 2012 school year, more than 70% of publicly funded students in New Orleans were in charter schools—the largest percentage in the nation.

Vallas notes that with skilled management, positive results can take place in regular schools as well as charter schools. He also points to examples of some charter schools elsewhere in Louisiana that did not achieve the kind of positive results found in New Orleans. Careful selection and preparation of school leaders is critical to the charter school success or the success of any school. He

emphasizes the importance of flexibility, attracting talented teachers and leaders, adopting a quality curriculum, and having a 21st century focus.

The Wilson Center's interest in quality education is part of the Center's broader focus on innovation systems and long-term international competitiveness. In the United States and around the world, there is a growing emphasis on education as one of the keys to economic prosperity in the 21st century.

The United States has reason to be concerned about the quality of its K-12 education system. As Vallas has noted, the U.S. performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment ("PISA") is discouraging. Having American 15-year-olds ranked as 17th in science and 25th in mathematics does not bode well for America's future prosperity or national security. The warning signs about America's educational performance are not new. *A Nation At Risk,* a 1983 report released by the Reagan Administration, warned that America was lagging in its K-12 schools. The report became famous for the following quote: "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre education performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Despite the warning, there has not been nearly enough national improvement. The National Assessment of Education Progress, a national test, is given periodically to 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students in key subjects including mathematics and science. It is as close as the country comes to a national report card. The latest long-term trend assessment in mathematics had some good news mixed with some disappointment. Nine and 13-year-olds showed noticeable improvement in 2008 compared to 2004 and 1973. The results for 17-year-olds, however, showed essentially no gain over previous assessments.

Vallas and other experts stress that American schools have not declined. Rather it is a case of technology, a changing job market, and rising international competition demanding much more of America's educational system. Attracting and retaining top teachers is vitally important, but Vallas stresses that we also cannot neglect early childhood education, school improvement-focused state and district governance, and a 21st century curriculum.

The Woodrow Wilson Center is dedicated to creating a neutral political space where new ideas can be considered and discussed in a civil, nonpartisan environment. It is in that spirit, that the Wilson Center is pleased to publish a paper that summarizes Paul Vallas' thinking on school reform for the 21st century. In the near future, we plan to explore Vallas' views on international school reform with a specific focus on Chile and Haiti.

PART I

The Need to Evolve

WHILE 2012 may be remembered as the year the U.S. school reform debate turned increasingly strident and bitter, the *summer* of 2012 will no doubt go down as the time that Michael Phelps made history *again*, the "Fab Five" flipped and vaulted their way into our hearts, Manteo Mitchell brought the concept of "taking one for the team" to a whole new level, U.S. Decathletes took both gold *and* silver, Team USA claimed victory in an epic gold medal rematch with Japan in women's soccer while smashing television viewing records, and hundreds of other heroic physical feats raised the athletic bar and brought honor to the nation. Individual accomplishments and personal stories of self-determination, hard work and overcoming adversity aside, the top story in any Internet search, however, was always the medal count. With the U.S. hovering at or near the top for much of the games, the question in the final days was, "Would America beat China in the overall medal count?"[1]

If only we as a nation could rally with the same unity and passion as that with which we support our Olympians, in an effort to reign supreme in a more critical numbers game in which much more is at stake than gold, silver or bronze bragging rights.

We aren't even close, and the nature of the current polarized debate over school reform isn't helping, as evidenced by the September 2012 Chicago Teachers Union Strike.

The 2011 release of the 2009 "*Programme for International Assessment*" ("PISA") test results by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development ("OECD") make clear that currently the U.S.A.'s educational ability is nowhere near as competitive on the world stage as is its athletic prowess. In fact, domestic reaction to the results veered between panic and moroseness at America's "educational decline." PISA, which is given every

three years, measures the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds internationally, the age at which students in most countries are nearing the end of their required time in school.

Fifteen-year-olds in the U.S. scored 14th in literacy, tied with Poland and Iceland, just one point ahead of Lichtenstein and barely above the average for all countries surveyed.[2] Our students ranked an embarrassing 25th in math, not only far behind number one Korea, but also trailing former Soviet-bloc countries Estonia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary.[3] In science, our 15-year-olds rank 17th, once again trounced by nations that may have surprised many Americans.[4] (Who knew students in New Zealand were science whizzes?)

As depressing and "un-winning" as these results are—it gets worse. The scores cited above only include member countries of OECD. When non-member countries are included in the rankings, Shanghai, Hong Kong/China and Singapore best all other countries across the board for a decisive sweep of academic gold, silver and bronze in every category, pushing the U.S. further down and well out of contention.[5] These results prompted U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to observe, "The mediocre performance of America's students is a problem we cannot afford to accept and cannot afford to ignore.[6]"

This growing distance between the United States and its international competitors is troubling enough, but when also factoring in the highly problematic and massive achievement gap present within the U.S. between minority and socio-economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers, it poses a major threat to the United States' long-term economic competitiveness. A 2008 analysis by McKinsey and Company found that the achievement gap in the U.S. had imposed "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession."[7] Accepting this bleak assessment, it would be logical to conclude that something has recently gone fundamentally wrong in our system. The reality, however, is that the inadequacy of the U.S. K-12 education system is far from a new development. American public education has always been pedestrian and inferior, and is perhaps best viewed as a "mediocre, serviceable system for preparing students for an agrarian or assembly-line world in which only an elite pursued higher education."[8]

Our K-12 weaknesses have been largely masked, however, by the U.S.' exceptionally large, diverse and accessible higher education system. Now,

with many industrial and developing countries investing heavily in post-secondary education, this advantage is rapidly disappearing. A new report from the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success finds that as other countries have increased their post-secondary attainment, the United States has fallen to 15th place among 34 OECD member countries in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with an Associate's level college degree or higher.[9] Today, more than half of young adults in leading OECD countries—Canada, South Korea, and Japan—have college degrees, compared to just 41% in the United States. These leading countries are on track to increase their college degree attainment rates to 60% by 2020.[10]

CONTRASTING APPROACHES

With the OECD scores and other indicators signifying that the U.S. is losing its advantage in post-secondary education, and in turn its competitiveness in the global economy, a reasonable solution might be for the U.S. to simply expend more money to keep up with the competition. However, the U.S. educational decline is more complex than just a problem of financial commitment. Over the last four decades, the per-student cost of operating the U.S. K-12 schools has more than doubled.[11] Federal, state, and local governments spent 35% more per pupil—in real-dollar terms—in 2009 than they did in 1990.[12] The U.S. at present spends more per student than any other OECD nation save Luxembourg.[13]

Since spending is internationally superior, the decline in U.S. educational competitiveness should instead be attributed to the inability to invest wisely in the *systemic reforms* that would remove obstacles impeding the modernization of our educational system to meet new realities brought on by the massive social, economic and technological changes of the past fifty years. U.S. policymakers could begin with an examination of the steps taken by the competition to evaluate the benefits of its approach. For example, Finland, Shanghai and Singapore all outperformed the U.S. in 2009 in all three PISA assessments: reading, math and science. These top performances come, for each, on the heels of recent systemic reforms to their own education system. In each case, the reforms were designed to address the changing social and economic environments in which their systems operate.

	2009 PISA Reading Results	2009 PISA Math Results	2009 PISA Science Results
OECD Average	493	496	501
United States	500	487	502
Finland	536	541	554
Shanghai	556	600	575
Singapore	526	526	542

** 2009 PISA Results*

In Finland, for example, the 1979 Teacher Education Reform Act took the crucial step of moving teacher education from teacher colleges to universities. As a result, teacher education in Finland has become more research-based, now requires a master's degree, and has become highly selective.[14] Singapore made changes in response to the changing global economy by creating multiple pathways for students into academic, polytechnic or technical institutes, expanding school choice and transitioning to a portfolio management of autonomous schools.[15] In Shanghai, a "Commissioned Administration" was implemented where "good" public schools take over "weaker" ones.[16] By 2002, three-quarters of all the schools in Shanghai were either restructured or closed.[17] While the methodology of each country varies, the pattern is the same: governments that proactively engage in the systemic reform of their education systems in the context of adapting to the changing economic and social landscape are rewarded with high performing systems and improved student achievement.

FAILURE TO EVOLVE

While PISA and other indicators demonstrate that U.S. schools are falling behind the competition, the perceived "decline" of the U.S. education system, however, is not an accurate reflection of any dramatic deterioration in U.S. schools, curriculum or instructional models. On the contrary, the quality of curriculum and instruction in the U.S. education system has likely never been better! This may fly in the face of popular opinion,

but consider: today we are experiencing more school choice, improved pedagogies, widespread improvements in professional development, unprecedented investment in early childhood education, and the movement towards universal Common Core Standards.[18] Put simply, the U.S. is not declining or moving backwards. It is, however, failing to move forward fast enough to keep up with the competition as required to maintain its position in the global economy.

If the U.S. is to catch up to its competitors, it must likewise evolve by first identifying the historical obstacles impeding adaptation, and then implementing systemic reforms which remove obstacles to adaptation. In short, we must create a system aligned to the realities and demands of the 21st century.

ECONOMIC CHANGES

Systems that, in their inception, made sense now drastically hold our students back from the opportunity to compete in the new global job market with its stark realities, including the outsourcing of hundreds of thousands of U.S. jobs and a growing cry from the technology sector for an increase in the annual number of H-1B visas issued to meet the need for technologically proficient employees inside the U.S., especially in science and engineering fields.[19] While the world around the U.S. education system has moved forward rapidly, the majority of our students are being taught with archaic curriculum using instructional materials that look nothing like the communication tools commonplace outside the classroom walls. A comparable analogy could be to the military, which historically has been chastised for preparing for the next war with the outdated tactics of the prior one. Put simply, our schools are preparing students for the jobs of today and tomorrow in a system of yesterday.

There is no greater evidence of this failure in the U.S. education system than the current construction of the American high school. Far too many high schools are locked in the past with a standardized vision of learning, a tendency to view academic and applied learning as an either/or proposition -with applied learning often treated as the poor stepchild, and with an absence of truly diverse learning opportunities. In their final years of formal schooling, our system is failing to expose our youth to the

currently "in-demand" range of disciplines, fields and careers, and as a result, is rendering them completely unprepared to participate in the 21st century economy. Given these failures to adapt, it is not surprising that only an astounding 24% of students graduate high school fully prepared for the rigors of university,[20] let alone the work-world, and 44% of freshman under age 25 must enroll in at least one remedial course in college.[21]

INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The failure of the U.S. education system to adapt to the realities of today is particularly obvious in the fields of information and technology. Seemingly everywhere, there is unlimited and unprecedented access to information. Internationally, the highest performing education systems are those that have adapted to this explosion of information via technology with a renewed focus on STEM training and the integration of career and technological training into their curricula.

In the U.S., however, millions of students are stuck in archaic classrooms and facilities that are hopelessly ill-equipped to enrich the information and technology experience and actually *work against* students by isolating them from the information and technology that floods their daily lives. When you observe children and how enthusiastically they adapt to and interact with technology, this is a crime akin to cutting someone off from his native language. Making matters worse, the outdated curriculum in most schools carves out little time to teach the skills in the crucial STEM areas necessary for the most competitive 21st century jobs. This stifling school structure not only has the adverse effect of killing students' interest and motivations; it is leaving them completely unprepared for the jobs of tomorrow. One former high school student may have put it best: "The need to know the capital of Florida died when my phone learned the answer. "[22]

HUMAN CAPITAL

U.S. public education is not only plagued by its failure to adapt to technological advances, but it has also suffered from a major decline in the quality of human capital available to serve as teachers and school leaders. The

United States education system unwittingly benefitted for decades from a professional career arena that was relatively closed to women and minorities. As a result, the best and brightest women and minorities often found themselves in classrooms, creating a high-quality public education teacher-workforce. As the U.S. economy grew and equal rights protections were enacted, higher-paying career opportunities expanded for women and minorities, causing the pool of high quality teaching candidates to contract. Thus, a movement was begun in the 1980's to ward off projected teacher shortages through alternative certification. However, not enough has been done to broaden teacher recruitment through alternative certification routes, nor has there been significant focus on improving teacher training and development, including the re-evaluation of existing teacher licensure programs with an eye to raising the standards for those entering the profession.

It is true that by 2007, all 50 states had adopted at least some kind of alternative teacher certification program, but as of 2006, just 59,000 alternative teacher certificates were being awarded annually,[23] in the context of more than 3 million fulltime elementary and secondary teachers nationwide.[24] It is discouraging that just one-third or fewer of all new teachers are alternatively certified, as alternative certification is well suited to the "the explicit purpose of filling the demand for teachers in specific subject areas in specific schools in specific geographic regions."[25] Alternative certification has evolved from a stop-gap against teacher shortages into a sophisticated model for recruiting, training and certifying candidates who are rigorously screened and who already have at least a bachelor's degree and frequently, career experience, resulting in deeper content area mastery.[26] Yet, with today's still-piecemeal alternative certification programs, the current need for highly skilled teachers, especially in STEM, cannot possibly be met. The U.S. system still relies upon a diminished talent pool that often suffers from poor training and preparation to provide the majority of teachers responsible for educating our nation.

SOCIAL CHANGES

The U.S. system has not only failed to adapt to the changing economic and technological realities, but has also drastically failed to recognize and respond to a changed, and arguably degraded, social environment to ensure that our public education system is meeting its students' needs.

As economic inequality continues to grow, the impact of early childhood education on the nation's widening achievement gap has taken on critical importance. Abundant evidence confirms that the years from newborn to three are the most crucial in a child's development. The achievement gap will never be closed unless early interventions are present, especially in situations where mothers are poor, single, young, and under-educated themselves. Early literacy, numeracy and vocabulary, along with health care and parental training, could change the lifelong landscape for millions of Americans born into challenged, if not dire, socio-economic circumstances. Yet, almost 80% of public funding for early childhood development is spent on four year-olds, after the most critical years have passed, and funding for "Cradle to the Classroom" education programs is frequently lacking if not completely unavailable .[27]

The failure to adapt the structure of schools or services provided is not limited to early childhood education. As of 2010, a full 34% of youth under age eighteen were living in single-parent households and 78% of all mothers with children ages 6-17 worked outside the home.[28] Such societal shifts dramatically limit the availability of after-school supervision, with the U.S. Census Bureau estimating that there were approximately 15million "latchkey kids" in 2010.[29] It is well-known that unsupervised after-school hours are the peak time for juvenile crime and experimentation with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and sex,[30] and teens who do not participate in after school programs are nearly three times more likely to skip classes or use marijuana or other drugs.[31] In spite of these dangers, and not to mention the waste of precious learning time, the school day remains structured as if the majority of families have the means to provide supervision at home each day after 3:00 p.m. The school year is no different. Originally based upon the "Farmer's Almanac" calendar for a largely agrarian society, the U.S. school calendar has remained largely unchanged for decades. Yet, there is an abundance of research demonstrating that long summers adversely impact learning retention and academic growth,[32] particularly in families that lack resources to keep children engaged and stimulated while out of the classroom for many consecutive weeks. While other countries are elongating the school day and school year, many states across the country are cutting back on the length of both the school day and school year, while few districts are wisely increasing education hours.[33]

OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

While the need to evolve the U.S. public education system to adapt to these multiple economic and social changes seems obvious, there are unfortunately a series of obstacles that stand in the way of engaging in the type of systemic reforms that have taken place in some of the world's highest performing education systems. The most glaring of these obstacles is often one of the most politically contentious—collective bargaining.[34] Much like other labor-relations bargains struck in the mid-20th century, the contractual relationship between teachers and school governing bodies provide increased job security and benefits to teachers in exchange for limited wages. The agreements impede schools from evolving and adapting in several ways.

Frequently, schools are prohibited from using compensation as a tool to recruit, reward, and retain the most competent teachers. At the same time, they are prohibited from assigning or removing teachers on the basis of performance or "fit." Teachers often complain that they are over-regulated with work rules that stifle creative problem solving and impede their ability to serve students, with many of those rules and regulations stemming from the very agreements purported to protect union members.[35] And, while no one would deny teachers their earned retirement or medical insurance, the reality is that tenure results in an aging teaching population with high legacy costs such as pensions, which gobble up a large proportion of school funding, diverting dollars from programs that directly impact instruction.

Furthermore, collective bargaining agreements are often the biggest impediment to a district's ability to design the school day and school year in the scheme that is most beneficial to students. Despite an obvious need to increase the amount of instructional time on task to ensure students receive adequate time for remedial interventions and to ensure that STEM is not being neglected, schools need to be allowed some flexibility. Yet, the unions almost uniformly push back on attempts to add classroom time. At the same time, ironically, passionate individual teachers are begging for more time to teach the enrichment arts. For example, a proposal to lengthen the school day was a hugely contentious issue in the negotiations prior to the teachers' strike against the Chicago Public Schools in September[36] Collective bargaining agreements should be school improvement plans. Instead, they often hinder government's ability to both ensure funds go directly to student services and

free schools from the contractual chains that bind them from meeting their students' needs.

Financial instability continues to pose a major obstacle to reform in districts as well. In addition to the diversion of available funding to expenditures that do not improve curriculum and instruction, school districts often are subject to highly inconsistent year-to-year funding that impedes their ability to engage in systemic reforms. This is most damaging to low-income school districts, where locally based funding models frequently result in students who need the most support receiving the least resources. This feast-or-famine funding experience can be debilitating to district reform efforts, as federal funding or grants can provide an influx of capital needed to start positive changes, yet can just as quickly dry up, leaving districts in financial peril as they struggle to finance unfunded mandates and mushrooming healthcare or pension costs. With most districts lacking seasoned financial experts to navigate this challenging funding environment, it is not surprising that hundreds of school systems often find themselves in a sea of financial instability.

An outgrowth of both the limitations of collective bargaining and financial instability in education is the challenge to develop high quality human capital pipelines into the classroom.

With a depleted talent pool due to the modern competitive economy, deficiencies in our colleges of education, and multiple impediments to selecting, retaining and promoting based on performance, our education system struggles to staff schools with the best and brightest.[37] A 2010 analysis by McKinsey found that most of the teachers recruited by districts come from the bottom two-thirds of their college classes, and in many schools in poor neighborhoods, from the bottom third.[38] The impact of this talent gap on the U.S. system's ability to compete internationally cannot be underestimated. As Joel Klein, former chancellor of schools in New York stated, "If your human capital isn't at the top, that makes all the other hills harder to climb."

Adding to the challenge of these obstacles is the massive decentralization of the U.S. educational system. Because the system is a network of thousands of locally funded and managed districts, there is constant inequality in funding, which exacerbates the national achievement gap. Geography obviously plays a role as well. Consider a tiny school district in the mountains, or tucked into a bayou or isolated in a desert. It would be next to impossible, under our current system, for schools such as these—

and their underfunded, small and mid-sized urban counterparts—to tap into science-based, best practice curriculum and instructional models, pedagogies and interventions. Nor are they able to access, in any significant fashion, the growing pool of alternatively-certified teachers with deep content area mastery. And, in the context of our nationwide educational community where, even in the best case scenarios, research and development ("R&D") is both under-prioritized and under-funded, poor and/or remote districts are completely isolated from the tools and practices that other countries are taking to scale with impressive results.

It should come as little or no surprise given these institutional obstacles that the U.S. education system, in spite of outpacing its main competitors in per-pupil funding, has largely failed to evolve on par with its international competition. Funding alone will not push the U.S. system to engage in the systemic reforms that will align public education with the 21st century. Instead, government must change. It must evolve from a traditional bureaucracy into a school improvement organization bent on removing the aforementioned obstacles and enabling public education to advance in response to economic and societal changes and in turn, restore U.S. international competitiveness.

GOVERNMENT AS A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ORGANIZATION

For the U.S. education system to move forward and regain its international competitiveness, government must take on the role of a school improvement organization that exists to breakdown structural barriers impeding systemic reform. While the U.S. public education system as a whole has failed to remove these barriers, there is a strong record of results in several urban and quasi-state districts that can serve as a knowledge base for how governments can operate to implement this reform agenda.

For governments to successfully follow this path towards meaningful and systemic reform, they must adopt and prioritize the following core principles. The first is that governments must be driven to modernize school systems to make them relevant again. With rapid social and economic change and an outdated public education model, this principle must be at the forefront of any reform effort to ensure that students are

being provided with the opportunity to compete internationally in the 21st century. The second is that governments must work to design an institutional structure that is flexible enough to endure and adjust to the ever-evolving socio-economic needs of a community. Only by maintaining institutional flexibility can governments hope to create school systems that are able to continue to adapt to economic and societal changes and maintain competitiveness. With these two principles as a foundation, there are nine aligned strategies that governments can follow to remove structural barriers and implement systemic reform.

CREATE AND PRESERVE INSTITUTIONAL FLEXIBILITY

To create a competitive school system, governments must take the crucial first step of removing institutional obstacles to design schools that benefit children. This institutional flexibility can be obtained by expanding school choice for parents, removing restrictions on the length of the school day and school year, and ensuring that all schools have the autonomy to recruit and retain teachers and principals based on qualifications and performance. Providing cause for optimism, the federal government has already begun to take this step by disbursing significant funds as a reward for systemic change through the Race to the Top ("RTTT") competition and the award of Innovation Grants, as well as its use of No Child Left Behind ("NCLB") waivers in order to promote the removal of institutional obstacles.

ENSURE FINANCIAL STABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

There is often no bigger impediment to meaningful reform than flexible and sound finances. Governments must ensure that while schools may not have all of the financial resources they desire or need, they do have the financial predictability to implement and sustain critical programs. This should come in conjunction with the removal of obstacles that impede a school's ability to allocate funds in the most cost effective manner, so the resources that are available can be maximized. Finally, governments must work to reduce current and future long term financial obligations that divert monies from the classroom.

PROVIDE BEST PRACTICE MODELS AND SUPPORT

The decentralization of schools has had a severely limiting effect on the spread of best practice models across the country. Governments must make available data-supported best practice models in critical areas, including but not limited to school management and climate, professional development, curriculum and instruction and student and teacher interventions. They need not only to communicate these best practice models, but also to provide the expertise and financing needed to fully implement them throughout a school system. For far too long there has been a dearth of R&D that is required for progress. Thus on a national scale, the USDOE should continue—and with increasing aggressiveness—to play a role as a school support organization that prioritizes research, development and delivery of the best practice models and supports available.

CREATE AND SUSTAIN A NEW TEACHER/PRINCIPAL PIPELINE

With a limited human capital pool, governments must create pipelines to recruit and train new teacher candidates for all schools. They need to embrace and support expansion of non-traditional and alternative pathways to certification, helping to expand the pool of qualified teacher candidates. Additionally, governments should sponsor and accredit "Dual Enrollment Programs" to encourage high performing university students to earn a teaching degree and certification while simultaneously pursuing their primary major.

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

With the current deficiencies in our colleges of education, it is crucial that governments take a prominent role in training and developing personnel. Governments should provide initial and in–service training to existing teachers who are weak, using value-added assessment measures to provide the support and accountability needed to improve instruction. Additionally, they must provide diverse teacher support models including

on-sight monitoring and training, distance training, videoconferences, online instructional support, and classroom best practices. In conjunction with the dissemination of best practices, governments must be able to learn from private or non-profit professional development organizations that produce the strongest results and duplicate these efforts where possible.

ENSURE ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

To meet the needs of the modern economy, schools must make the classroom environment and experience comparable to the jobs of tomorrow. Governments should adopt an online instructional management system to support implementation of the model curriculum and facilitate data-driven decision making. Simultaneously, they should work to establish a database and corresponding delivery system to provide principals, teachers, and parents access to school and student data in as close to "real time" as possible.

INTERVENE TO FIX FAILING SCHOOLS

Governments must take accountability for schools and devise an "end-game strategy" for fixing chronically failing schools. This does not mean states' departments of education should be micro-managing districts or schools, but it does mean that they would all be well served to proactively develop internal capacity and processes for intervention into failing schools. Several states, including Illinois, are currently engaged in this important work. This work should include the establishment of clear and transparent policies and standards as to the criteria by which a school is designated "failing," as well as a series of "tiered interventions" that are designed to fit the needs of each school, based on the severity of the deficiencies and its capacity, or lack thereof, to reverse course on its own. Some schools may require aggressive school improvement plans, others moderate restructuring, while those in the most dire condition may need to be closed and turned over to pre-qualified best practice school providers. The key is for each state to develop a toolbox of interventions to have ready to meet the needs of schools in varying states of distress and to ensure that its interventions are balanced with a highly effective government

accountability system to measure the impact of any intervention from moderate to drastic, on a continuous basis.

EXPAND HIGH QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES

Governments also must have the capacity to create and promote high quality school choice. They need to be in the business of creating a system for the identification, recruitment and incubation of high quality school models. The system should be ideologically agnostic as to the public or private nature of the model, with primacy of importance placed on the model's record of delivering high quality results for students. In incubating these schools, governments must be able to help provide for the recruitment and training of new school management teams and staffs, the communication and fostering of community support, and the technical support needed surrounding the schools' opening. Furthermore, governments need to employ their accountability systems to evaluate the success of these new schools and help encourage and support successful schools in expanding and spreading their best practice models.

PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR EDUCATION AND BUSINESS INSTITUTIONS TO FORGE PARTNERSHIPS TO SECURE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND EXPAND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

With unpredictable resources, it is nearly impossible for any school or district on its own to close the information and technology gap holding its students back from 21st century learning. Governments, however, can play a crucial role in closing this gap by aligning schools with the resources in their local environment. Non-school stakeholders provide vast financial resources to support schools and can, in many cases, contribute physical and human resources needed to enhance learning. The innovation that has led to so many organizations' success in the private sector is a valuable resource that could be put to good use in the public education system. Partnering with local universities, for example, can provide an influx of new talent into local school systems that may not have otherwise entered into public education. Likewise,

partnering with local vocational or technical colleges can provide the physical and human resources needed to provide students with 21st century technical training that high schools on their own would be completely incapable of providing. Creating such partnerships would ultimately have the effect of "unfreezing schools" by providing both academic and applied learning, as a significant portion of the learning experience is moved outside the school and students are placed in superior learning environments.

These are examples of many options available to governments in assuming the role of a school improvement organization for the dual purpose of removing structural barriers impeding systemic reform and providing the standards, support and accountability to ensure that high quality schools emerge. While the U.S. public education system as a whole has failed to remove these barriers, there is a strong record of results in several urban and quasi-state districts that can serve as a knowledge base for how governments can operate to implement this reform agenda. There is no better example of a government taking these critical steps than post-Katrina New Orleans.

NOTES

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24. In 2011, 3.7 teacher certificates were awarded. *See,* http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28
25. *Id.*
26. *Id.*
27. In 2001, the Federal Government spent $6.8 billion on Head Start (4-5 years) and 1.56 on Early Head Start (O-3 years). *See,* http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/24.pdf
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PART II

Rebuilding and Reforming New Orleans

THERE is no more controversial and comprehensive U.S. public school system reform effort than the post-Katrina reconstruction of the New Orleans Public Schools. The New Orleans experience and its successes provide evidence of the effective role that government can play in molding its infrastructure to create high performing public schools.

PRE-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

In 2005, the New Orleans school system, as governed by the Orleans Parish School Board ("OPSB"), was the lowest performing school district in Louisiana and was considered among the worst, or perhaps *the* worst performing school district in the nation. Student test scores were abysmal, the school system was in constant financial crisis and the dilapidated school buildings and facilities were, for the most part, in deplorable condition with leaky plumbing, inoperable toilets and electrical problems. Adding to the instability of the system, OPSB went through eight superintendents in eight years. Corruption was so pervasive that the FBI established an office inside the OPSB office to investigate multiple cases of fraud. Ultimately, 31 school board employees were indicted and the school board president was convicted and sentenced to prison.[1] "In the dismal gallery of failing urban school systems," wrote Associated Press reporter Adam Nossiter in April of 2005, "New Orleans may be the biggest horror of them all."[2] While dedicated educators and education advocates cried out for reform, the school board establishment and city hall were unresponsive.

These conditions were allowed to persist in the run up to Hurricane Katrina, in spite of the fact that in 2003, over opposition from the OPSB, voters

in the state approved, by a 60-to-40 percent margin, a constitutional amendment that created the state-run Recovery School District ("RSD").[3] The amendment authorized the new RSD to take over and transform failing schools. The RSD was seldom utilized prior to Katrina, which demolished New Orleans shortly after school opened in August 2005, virtually wiping out the school system. More than 100 of the OPSB's 127 buildings were destroyed or so severely damaged that they could not be immediately reoccupied. Students and teachers were evacuated or migrated to other cities and states. As a result, OPSB, already financially strapped and with no students to serve, terminated its contracts with all teachers and school employees before the year's end.

THE RSD'S MANDATE

In November 2005, with OPSB in disarray and ill-equipped to re-open schools, the state legislature passed "Act 35" authorizing the RSD to take over *all* failing or near failing schools in New Orleans, resulting in the immediate transfer of more than 100 schools to the RSD.[4] The RSD's mandate was to build a new school system based on the following principles:

ACCOUNTABILITY: The Louisiana Department of Education ("DOE"), mindful of the corrupt history in the OPSB and in New Orleans in general, set as its first goal the creation of a transparent system for accountability. This included setting a clear standard for intervening in or taking over failing schools. The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education ("BESE") designates a school as "failing" after four consecutive years of failure to meet "minimum academic standards," as based on Louisiana Educational Assessment Program ("LEAP") scores. Once a school is placed into the RSD, it must remain there for at least five years before returning to local control to give management time to effect institutional change.

ESTABLISHING "A SYSTEM OF SCHOOLS" AND NOT A SCHOOL SYSTEM: The RSD New Orleans would create a system under which independent and autonomous schools could emerge and thrive. Under this model, the system would rely on entrepreneurship, innovation and empowerment to drive the educational process. It would not rely on the strength of an individual superintendent or "top-down" management model.

TRANSFORMATION OF FAILING SCHOOLS: Schools that had been chronically underperforming would be closed and reopened under new management by school providers, without the displacement of students.

EXPANSION OF HIGH QUALITY SCHOOLS: Quality school providers from other areas of the nation would be identified, recruited and incubated to replicate their models in New Orleans, while the few local schools that had performed well prior to Katrina would receive support to open new "franchises" in failing schools.

SCHOOL CHOICE FOR FAMILIES: Families would be permitted to select a school of choice for their children, rather than being unilaterally assigned to an individual school or confined to a geographic attachment area. In effect, all RSD schools would become open enrollment schools without admissions tests.

SCHOOL CHOICE FOR EDUCATORS: Educators would be free to select their choice of employment and would not be barred by rules of seniority or tenure from applying for employment in schools aligned with their individual educational philosophies.

SITE SELECTION FOR ALL SCHOOLS: Schools would be given site selection, meaning they would be permitted to recruit, retain and promote teachers based on their qualifications and record of performance, as opposed to years in service.

GOVERNMENT AS A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ORGANIZATION

The state DOE took the position that the RSD should function as a school improvement organization rather than a school management organization. The central office would not micro-manage schools at the local level, but rather provide the standards, support and accountability needed to ensure that high quality schools would emerge.

In effect, the DOE's overarching mandate to the RSD was for it to remove all obstacles that impeded schools from benefiting the students they

serve. This included eradicating obstacles impeding: (1) the selection of curriculum and instructional models; (2) recruitment, selection and retention of teachers based on performance; (3) design of the school day and school year to allow for the instructional time-on-task needed to increase student achievement; (4) the flow of state and local dollars to individual schools and classrooms; and (5) efforts by traditional schools to convert to charters and the selection of providers to take over failing schools and open new schools.

The RSD responded to the state's goal by aggressively moving to create "freedom schools." This move liberated traditional schools through several mechanisms. The RSD removed failing or near failing schools from terrible OPSB management by awarding charters to qualified school providers to either run those schools, or in cases where schools had been destroyed by Katrina, to open new schools in their place. The RSD also took on the responsibility of directly operating a number of failing schools, and it too opened new schools to replace schools destroyed by Katrina. In later cases where the RSD intervened in school districts outside of New Orleans, the RSD radically restructured failing schools that were subject to state takeover, pursuant to the state-designed school improvement plans implemented by a device known as "Memorandums of Understanding" ("MOU"). While charters garner most of the attention, the fight to liberate the traditional schools should also be examined, as the RSD sought, with success, to provide these schools similar independence from constricting state mandates and collective bargaining agreements.

THE ROLE OF THE RSD IN NEW ORLEANS

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Awarding and Revoking Charter School Contracts

In addition to implementing a transparent protocol for triggering state intervention, the state also developed clear criterions to ensure that the highest standards would be met before awarding charters to providers. All providers are required to be "not-for-profit" and must undergo about a six-month qualification process[5] during which the state investigates academic acumen, management structure and financial viability. Each applicant is required to submit a proposal to the state detailing every aspect of its ability to operate

a school, including the quality of its curriculum and instructional plans, the experience and education of its leadership team, and its strategy for recruiting and training exceptional teachers. If the applicant is a new provider with no track record of operating charter schools, the state board examines the quality of the proposal and performs extensive reference checks.

The first charter schools to open in New Orleans made up a cluster of nine formerly traditional schools seeking to take advantage of the freedom that chartering provides to structure education in the manner most beneficial to students and to ensure that funding flows directly to their schools and not through OPSB. This group of schools incorporated in 2005 as the "Algiers Charter Schools Association" or the "Algiers Cluster," as it became commonly known. Operating as its own Local Education Agency ("LEA"), the Algiers Cluster "freedom schools" today successfully serve nearly 5,500 students from mostly low-income families along the western bank of the Mississippi River.[6] Among other traditional schools that converted to the charter model early on were Sophie B. Wright and the much-celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in the Lower 9th ward, where Katrina's wrath caused the greatest destruction and claimed the most lives.

Charter providers are also afforded the opportunity to apply to become "pre-qualified" to take over existing failing schools, which avoids displacing and scattering the student body. This has been done with greater frequency in recent years. For example, Esperanza Charter School is an elementary school that was taken over by the successful Lafayette Academy Charter School organization, while the Knowledge is Power Program ("KIPP") Renaissance High School prequalified and took over Frederick Douglas High School. The LEA, FirstLine Schools, which operates five schools, took over two of them (John Diebert Community School and Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School) through prequalification, while ReNEW Schools, a spinoff of FirstLine and KIPP, operates five schools, three of which (Batiste Cultural Arts Academy (formerly Live Oak), SciTech Academy (formerly Laurel) and Reed/Little Woods) were taken over through prequalification.

Cognizant some providers might struggle to duplicate the success of Algiers, KIPP, FirstLine and others, the DOE also instituted a strict accountability system to ensure that schools would not fail indefinitely. Charter schools are subject to the state's accountability program, including high stakes testing requirements. Charters are also required to meet or exceed minimum standards for instructional time and special education

mandates.[7] To ensure that (1) school providers are complying; and (2) students are making Adequate Yearly Progress ("AYP"), providers are subject to a three-year, and then a five-year review to determine whether their performance is such that they may continue to operate. An example of the efficacy of the system is the BESE's 2011 revocation of the Tremé Charter School Association's charter for McDonough 42 Elementary School. The state turned control of McDonough to a new provider, the Choice Foundation.[8] That same year, the state turned over control of the Tubman Charter School in Algiers to Crescent City Charter. The state has revoked at least five charters in New Orleans, while in the RSD outside of New Orleans, the state has turned management of at least nine schools over to new providers.

Resources

The state also positioned its "system of schools" for success in New Orleans by creating a level playing field. It ensured that all schools, whether charter or traditional, would have access to the same resources. Charter schools, or clusters of schools, are treated as if they are their own LEA's, comparable to independent school districts, so that they receive their funding directly through the traditional per-pupil funding formula. They are all funded according to enrollment (also called average daily attendance, or "ADA"), and receive funding according to the number of students attending. Unlike other U.S. states, Louisiana's funding formula is agnostic as to the "type" of school model being funded. (Contrast, for example, Minnesota where charters receive only the state's contribution to the funding formula, or about 75%, of a district school's total per-pupil allocation).[9] The state model ensures, in a 100% choice system, that the money follows each student to his or her school of choice without diverting significant dollars for the sustenance of a large, bureaucratic central office. As a result, the educational dollars flowing to the schools and into the classrooms are maximized.

The state provides additional valuable resources by assisting with a "human capital pipeline," through partnerships and with support from education reform non-profits including New Schools for New Orleans, Teach for America, and Teach NOLA, which is the local chapter of the New Teacher Project. These organizations recruit and train high quality candidates for teacher and school leadership positions in all New Orleans schools. The state also supports educational partnerships with non-governmental organizations and institutions such as New Leaders for New Schools to support the

identification, recruitment and incubation of new school leaders and managers, including "start-up" funds for charter schools. These alliances have brought even more resources into the district, from foundations and philanthropic entities. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, and The Broad Foundation, among others, have been generous in providing support for the restructuring of failing schools and the creation of new high quality schools. This concentrated level of support for charter schools has been a critical factor to their success in New Orleans.

Finally, while most U.S. charters do not receive resources to secure facilities,[10] the RSD is unique in providing buildings to many nonprofit charter school providers. When determining "who" would occupy new constructed schools, and "which" hurricane-damaged or destroyed schools to renovate or rebuild, and in "what" order of priority, the decisions were made regardless of the school management type. Going forward, the charter providers are responsible for basic maintenance and custodial services, while the RSD manages the capital planning, funding and construction responsibilities. The RSD also extends supports to charter schools in other areas of need upon request, providing, for example, special education ("SPED") support services to help charters meet their SPED mandates.

Performance

In 2005, fewer than 5% of New Orleans' public school students attended charter schools. By the 2010- 2011 school year, that figure rose to more than 70%,[11] with charter enrollment expected to continue to increase in 2012.[12] Thus, in six short years and with a lot of hard work, the Louisiana Department of Education transformed the role of government from a school "operator," to an education facilitator, enabler and regulator. Rather than forcing schools to implement mandates from bureaucrats, this new "system of schools" empowered local schools to flourish, as thousands of exceptional educators joined with parents and students to set high expectations, embrace rigorous curriculum and provide underprivileged children unprecedented access to high quality educational choices. The dramatic improvement of K-12 education in New Orleans during this period[13] has resulted in Louisiana becoming recognized as a national leader in education reform.[14] In fact, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, after a lengthy study by Fredrick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, labeled New Orleans as America's top city for reform.[15]

Because Louisiana started out near or at the bottom nationally, with thousands of students over many decades failing to obtain even the most basic skills through public schooling, much work lies ahead.[16] However, the transformation is evident and with the structure that has been institutionalized, there is vast potential for continued improvement. In short, there is no turning back. Today, the New Orleans public schools are realizing record-breaking test score increases and rising graduation rates.

Perhaps the most accurate measurement of progress in New Orleans public schools is the combined District Performance Score ("DPS"). This score considers all students, tests and performance levels and is calculated as if all public school students in New Orleans attended a single school. In 2005, the OPSB earned a DPS of 56.9. In 2011, the combined DPS for RSD and OPSB students was 83.2, representing a 26.3 point increase. That's more than twice the increase for the state during that same time period.[17]

Ten Indicators of Improvement: (Source Louisiana DOE18)

1. There are more New Orleans school students performing at grade level than ever before. This has increased significantly since the 2005 transfer of schools from OPSB to RSD. In 2005, only one out of three New Orleans students (35%) were performing at or above grade level ("Basic" or above). Currently, 56% are performing at or above grade level. This is a 21% improvement in New Orleans, compared to a 7% improvement statewide during the same period.

2. In 2005, 63% of New Orleans schools were not meeting the state's minimum performance score. In 2011, that number had dropped to just 23%.[19]

3. Overall test score gains in all schools in NOLA were more than double the statewide gains during the same period. From 2005 to 2011, growth in New Orleans was 26.3% while growth statewide was 11.2%.

4. Fewer students are dropping out of school than ever before, with the biggest decline coming in the past two years. The dropout rate fell from 11.4% in 2005 (annually) to 4.1% in 2011, which is equal

to the statewide dropout rate, thus closing the gap between New Orleans and the rest of the state.

5. There is a dramatic reduction in the number of high school students attending failing high schools. In 2005, 71.8% of all New Orleans high school students were attending failing high schools. In 2011, just 28.1% were still attending failing high schools.

6. The achievement gap between New Orleans' students and the rest of the state in all categories—which has always been stubbornly large—is narrowing and in some cases is thankfully eliminated. This achievement gap has been especially pronounced between African American students.
   - The percentage of New Orleans black[20] students scoring at "Basic" or above has grown from 32% in 2007 to 53% in 2011. This has reversed the achievement gap among black students statewide.
   - In 2007 black students statewide performed 11% better than black students in New Orleans. In 2011, black students from New Orleans performed 2% better than black students statewide.

7. Economically disadvantaged and special education students are also narrowing their gaps:
   - In regard to economically disadvantaged students of any race, students scoring at "Basic" or above went from 32% in 2007, to 52% in 2011, narrowing the gap with the state from 14% to 6%.
   - In regard to special education students, the number of students scoring at "Basic" or above has grown from 11% to 36%, narrowing the gap from 12% to 4%.

8. While New Orleans schools overall have improved, the RSD schools (80% of all schools) have been driving the biggest gains. Over the past 4 years, RSD students have experienced unprecedented improvements, at times more than triple the percentage increases seen at the state level. Additionally, the combined number of 4th and 8th graders being promoted to the next grade level has risen from 41% in 2005 to 67% in 2011. An analysis of the RSD schools operating since 2007 reveals average gains in percent

of students scoring at Basic or above to be two, three, four and sometimes even five times the average statewide gains, depending on the grade.

9. The double digit decline in annual drop-out rates from 18% in 2007 to 6.3% in 2011 is further proof of the momentum.

10. And finally, the senior graduation rate in 2007 was just 50%. In 2011, an impressive 94% of all RSD high school seniors graduated.[21]

The data overwhelmingly points to the inescapable conclusion that the RSD is a significant success and presents the country with a model for rapid school improvement.

INVITING CONTROVERSY: TAKING DIRECT CONTROL OF THE WORST SCHOOLS IN THE NATION

The attention drawn to the successes in New Orleans is mirrored by the controversy that those successes have generated, and, in turn, that controversy is set against the backdrop of the broader education reform debate raging today in America. Everyone seems to find in the New Orleans experience some ammunition for his or her position, whatever that position may be.

For example, some advocates for New Orleans-style transformation are wont to credit all of its success to the power of charter schools, to the exclusion of most everything else. They argue that in hindsight, the RSD should not have been permitted to directly operate traditional schools, but rather should have been limited exclusively to overseeing charters. To sustain this argument, and to make the case that the RSD is no better equipped than local school districts to improve education, they constantly cite the superior performance of the New Orleans' charter schools in comparison to the RSD's direct-run schools in the city. However, this reasoning is flawed because the RSD is experiencing success in operating direct-run and MOU schools, while *outside of New Orleans*, many of the charters approved by the state have failed to perform as expected. Largely because the media has under-reported these successes and failures, the lessons from this experience are left out of the debate.

Pursuant to the state legislature's November 2005 passage of "Act 35," the RSD assumed responsibility for *all* failing New Orleans schools, including responsibility for the day-to-day, direct operation of the those schools in the chaotic, early post-Katrina period. This challenge cannot be understated. Previously, the RSD had responsibility for just a few open and operational, although failing, schools. In the yawning vacuum left by Katrina and the decades of incompetence and corruption in the OPSB, culminating in OPSB's inability to re-open schools and its dismissal of its entire workforce during the post-storm paralysis,[22] the RSD had to literally build a functioning school district almost from scratch. The challenge included the assumption of day-to-day operation of dozens of schools in a wrecked and overwhelmed city.

To fulfill its mandate, the RSD scrambled to open its direct-run schools on makeshift or temporary campuses with a patchwork of new teachers and administrators, while accommodating a full contingent of hurricane-displaced students returning at every grade level and in an uneven trickle throughout the year. While the new RSD charter providers faced similar challenges with facilities and faculty, most non-traditional operators opened the early charter schools just a few grades at a time and limited themselves to fixed enrollment dates.

In contrast, the traditional RSD direct-run schools were "schools of last resort" for many children who slowly returned to the city over years, and at all times of the year, in the wake of Katrina. Many of these students had been out of school entirely while sheltering from the storm's destruction. Nearly all returned behind grade level—some as many as four grades behind, by the time they arrived home to enroll. Some returnees merely missed the window to apply for any of the city's open-enrollment charter schools, while others had parents who were less engaged in their education or weren't motivated to apply for charter schools. The direct-run high schools in particular were adversely affected by high student mobility rates with students returning year-round over a four-year period, and with an average 4th grade reading level. At its highest point, student mobility in the high schools exceeded a shocking 50%, as low income students transferred from school to school as their families relocated from neighborhood to neighborhood. Many families treated the direct-run schools as transition schools, with students spending a year or less in the district before applying for the ever-increasing number of charter seats and moving on.

PERFORMANCE

These conditions presented obvious additional challenges to the RSD's already challenged direct-run schools, yet they managed to improve test scores and graduation performance at rates closely paralleling the charter schools. The contrast in actual test scores, as opposed to improvement rates, is a product of the direct-run schools' much more dismal starting point.

For example, from 2007 to 2011, the dropout rate in the RSD's direct-run high schools was reduced from 21.9% to 9.1% (12.8% improvement), while in charter schools the dropout rate decreased from 6.7% to 3.0% (4.7% improvement). Today, there are no comprehensive high schools remaining in the RSD's portfolio, making current performance comparisons irrelevant.

THE RSD EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE OF NEW ORLEANS

What happened in New Orleans presents a cause for celebration by reform advocates and the system's architects—but the RSD's experience outside of New Orleans illustrates that advocates who argue in favor of charters in absolute terms are as misguided as advocates who oppose them under any circumstances. To wit, only one of the charters awarded by the DOE outside of New Orleans since 2007 has met state standards, of the original 11 charters, nine have been voluntarily surrendered and are currently direct-run schools. Evident improvement in the traditional, direct-run schools is ignored, as are the struggles and arguable failures the RSD itself experienced in trying to establish successful charter schools outside of New Orleans.

SETBACK—STRUGGLES CHARTERS OUTSIDE OF NEW ORLEANS FACE

The RSD received most of its attention for rebuilding schools in New Orleans in the wake of Katrina's tragic and dramatic destruction. Lesser known is that after 2007, the RSD began to assume responsibility for struggling schools in other regions of Louisiana.[23] The RSD duly chartered schools in two of these districts as well, but could not match its successes in New Orleans. Because most of the failing schools turned over to charter providers in those districts proved unsuccessful, the overwhelming ma-

jority (82%) surrendered their charters to the BESE, which placed them into the RSD to directly operate. The explanation for this outcome is fairly simple: in an effort to speed up the chartering process, the state deviated from the standards implemented in New Orleans and did not follow its original model with fidelity. In some cases, charter applicants were not subjected to New Orleans' rigorous vetting process. The state also failed to follow its own "incubation" model. For example, in New Orleans, the RSD would identify a charter provider and then recruit and put into place a "local school leadership team," long before the charter school became operational. In its haste to bring better educational opportunity to students in failing schools in two large urban districts, the state in some cases approved charters, with the school allowed to open and accept students in as little as three months later.

Many of these charters also lacked the organizational support available in New Orleans through its partnership with groups such as New Schools New Orleans, Teach for America, Teach NOLA, etc. This lack of external partners with their valuable resources negatively impacted human resources and other strategic areas.

Perhaps most deciding was the presence of a challenge that creates an uphill battle for charters in many communities across the country: lack of a level playing field due to an openly hostile district and municipal environment. District and municipal environments are two of the six metrics used in the previously mentioned AEI/Fordham study that rated New Orleans as the best city for reform.[24] While AEI/Fordham did not review the outlying Louisiana districts, if it had, these communities would have received an "F" in both of those metrics because the Districts did not welcome the charters, and in some cases, actively worked to recruit students back to the direct-run schools. In these school districts, local government, community based organizations and/or newspaper editorial boards were often not of an entrepreneurial mindset and rejected change in favor of the status quo. The lack of external supports taken for granted in New Orleans, coupled with the speed with which the state moved while failing to accurately take the local temperature, doomed many of these schools for failure out of the gate.

SUCCESS ON A NEW FRONT: RSD/LA: DIRECT RUN SCHOOLS

In spite of its failure with non-New Orleans charters, the RSD did find success with its methodology for improving traditional, direct-run schools in other areas of Louisiana. This methodology took the form of an MOU system that allowed the RSD to intervene in failing schools without actually turning the schools over to private, non-profit school providers, or taking direct responsibility itself for the schools' day-to-day operations.

Under the MOU process, when a school or district became eligible for state takeover, the RSD dispatched academic and financial experts to the district to work with the local superintendent to develop a comprehensive "school restructuring plan," designed to ensure that the schools began to implement with fidelity those best practices that are present in all high performing schools, whether charter or traditional. The RSD required, pursuant to the MOU, that the local school or district utilize the same models that the RSD applied to the direct-run schools under its responsibility in New Orleans.

Within four years, all of the direct-run schools outside New Orleans and two-thirds of the "MOU schools" showed improvement with the majority of schools meeting minimum performance standards. When the RSD's direct-run MOU schools outside of New Orleans were aggregated into a single district for test score purposes, as is the state's practice, that "district" ranked third in the state in growth in 2011, with the RSD of New Orleans' direct-run schools ranking first. In total, the state has intervened in 40 schools outside of New Orleans. The RSD is currently in charge of direct day-to-day operations in nine of the eleven schools that were originally chartered, as well as another school placed in the RSD by the BESE.

LESSONS LEARNED

The RSD's success with direct-run schools is generally overshadowed by its big wins on the charter landscape in New Orleans, and is minimized by charter proponents who frequently draw negative comparisons between the traditional and charter schools, with the RSD blamed for its more poorly performing direct-run schools. Yet, outside of New Orleans, the RSD charters were arguably a disaster, as outlined above, while the direct and MOU clients demonstrated tangible success.

Thus, eschewing strict ideology and polarized positions for a more balanced and objective view, the *real* lessons of the RSD are as follows.

1. Chartering schools is a delicate and deliberate process requiring careful selection of charter school providers, charter school incubation and preparation before opening, with concentrated levels of support from the state and outside organizations.

2. When failing traditional schools are provided with best practice models, quality technical support, freedom from institutional constraints on selecting staff, designing curriculum, determining the quantity of instructional time on task, and some measure of organizational and financial flexibility; even the most dismally performing schools can improve.

While many advocates of school reform refuse to give the RSD credit for its effectiveness in improving struggling traditional schools without closing or radically reconstituting them, the fact remains that there are anti-charter school activists who refuse to acknowledge the RSD's success under *any* circumstances, including the arena of operating and managing traditional schools. While the theory is that truth will always emerge from the marketplace of ideas,[25] the very real and strident misrepresentation of the New Orleans experience as "the destruction of public education" only further polarizes the nationwide education reform debate at a time when both cooperation and identification of real solutions are urgently required. Thus, the myths perpetuated about New Orleans and other school reform efforts are worth examining.

MYTHS DEBUNKED

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN NEW ORLEANS ARE SELECTIVE IN THEIR ENROLLMENT

All RSD charter schools are first-come first-served, open enrollment schools and utilize a blind lottery for seats where demand exceeds capacity. To ease the process and provide maximum choice for parents, all schools in New

Orleans now operate under a city-wide, single application form. Now that the system is stabilized and charters in New Orleans constitute the majority of Orleans Parish schools, RSD charters are now also required to permit mid-year enrollment to share the burden of student mobility with the direct-run schools.

CHARTERS "DUMP" KIDS THEY DON'T WANT

Many schools, charter and traditional, seek to expel disruptive students. This is not a trait exclusive to charters. Charters will not be the first nor last public schools to attempt to transfer challenging students as well as teachers. To ensure no abuse of the system, the RSD tracks data related to all transfers, withdrawals and expulsions in the schools. Administrators are required to justify any such actions and to provide an appeal process. Between 2007 and 2010, most students transferring into RSD's direct-run schools were not transferring from New Orleans's charter schools, but rather from traditional public schools in the New Orleans' suburbs and elsewhere in the state and region.

SCHOOLS IMPROVED BECAUSE THEY RECEIVED AN INFUSION OF FEDERAL FUNDS

If the RSD's success was predicated on post-Katrina recovery money, those reforms could not possibly have been sustained. As it is, seven years after the storm, the RSD is still improving. Federal recovery dollars were mainly disaster "gap funding" to get the schools opened while the city was still shattered. As for the state, all that New Orleans received from Louisiana was a $33 million loan, in the context of a $240 million dollar annual average operating budget. Today, average total per-pupil funding (federal, state and local) is about $100 less per pupil total, with the state's share of the total contribution actually $1,000 less per pupil. While charters do receive some start-up funds, and individual charters engage in private fundraising, some very aggressively, it should be noted that traditional schools are also free to follow this model.

RSD SCHOOLS NEGLECT SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The SPED system in New Orleans was dismal pre-Katrina and in shambles post-Katrina. Adding to the chaos, all records (Individual Education Plans or "IEPs") were missing and presumed destroyed by the flood, forcing the RSD to develop new IEPs for each and every SPED student in the system within three months of assuming responsibility for 100 schools. In this context, what has been achieved is remarkable. In 2005, 60% of all special education students were in segregated settings; that number has been reduced to 10%. In an effort to improve the quality of SPED services, the RSD initiated an aggressive Response to Intervention ("RtI") program to provide comprehensive and aggressive intervention services for Tier 3 students. As a result, students who were previously almost guaranteed to be misclassified as SPED, despite suffering no actual cognitive disability, are now provided with the appropriate supplemental education services. The aggressive campaign by the RSD to reduce SPED tracking and to appropriately support students who are merely struggling and not suffering from diminished cognitive abilities takes on a larger societal impact when it is considered that, nationwide, a startling 20% of African-American boys or more are classified as SPED and doomed to all that it implies, while they make up just 9% of the student population.[26] Yet, in one of the most tragic and perhaps underreported scandals of America's school system, 80% of that group actually suffers no cognitive disabilities![27]

The RSD also set as a goal the development of SPED specialty programs in its charter schools to better serve populations suffering from autism, speech pathology and other disabilities, while creating economies of scale to improve service and expand choice for parents. As a result of these steps, between 2005 and 2011, the percentage of SPED students meeting standards at Basic or above increased from 11% to 36%, reducing the gap with the state by 60%. This is remarkable.

CHARTERS USURP LOCAL/COMMUNITY CONTROL

Charters and independent schools actually enhance local control because every school has a governing board. In New Orleans, the first charters were the Algiers Cluster schools, which re-opened after a community battle to wrest control away from the OPSB and to place school governance firmly in

the hands of local educators and neighborhood parents. Today, many communities such as Algiers provide real input that is heard and considered in the selection process of new school models and school providers.

CHARTERS DO NOT PERFORM WELL—THEY JUST MANIPULATE RESULTS TO GIVE THE APPEARANCE OF GROWTH

Why, when high poverty-low income districts show improvement do so many loud and vocal skeptics constantly question whether the results are legitimate? The bottom line in New Orleans is that the vast majority of schools are their own LEAs. This means that each LEA is tested, monitored and audited independently by the state DOE, and the state's enforcement of test security is among the most stringent in the nation. The fact that charters do not perform as well as traditional schools nationwide may hold true, but independent studies prove otherwise in New Orleans. The Fordham study found that when compared nationally to traditional schools, 17% of charters outperform traditional public schools, 46% perform about the same and 37% underperform. In New Orleans the results are different, as 48% of charters outperform, 26% perform about the same and 26% underperform.[28] These results are even more impressive taking into consideration that almost every public school in New Orleans was failing prior to Katrina.

NOTES

1. http://www.fbi.gov/neworleans/press-releases/2010/no031110.htm
2. http://educationnext.org/hope-after-katrina/
3. *Id.*
4. See: http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/SPELA-2011-4.pdf
5. http://www.rsdla.net/Resources/Charter_Schools.aspx
6. http://www.algierscharterschools.org/about/history.jsp
7. http://www.doe.state.la.us/divisions/charters/
8. http://www.choicefoundation.org/
9. http://www.pbs.org/closingtheachievementgap/faq.html#q7
10. *Id.*
11. http://www.publiccharters.org/data/files/Publication_docs/2011%20NAPCS%20Market%20Share%20Report_20111013T104601.pdf

12. http://www.rsdla.net/Resources/Charter_Schools.aspx
13. See, http://www.louisianaschools.net/topics/urgency_of_now.html
14. http://www.louisianaschools.net/bese/
15. http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201008_SchoolReformCities/Fordham_SchoolReform_Final_Complete.pdf
16. *Id.*
17. http://educatenow.net/2011/10/07/2011-scores-are-in/; "Louisiana Believes: Positive Proof Systemic Turnaround Can Happen," *Recovery School District*, May 2012.
18. *Id.*
19. *Id.* In 2011 the state of Louisiana raised its standard for failing schools. Under the new measure, 40% of students in New Orleans attend failing schools. If schools continue on the same pace of improvement as the past four years, the number of New Orleans students attending failing schools is projected to be in the single digits by 2016.
20. *Id.* In the cited report, the official state of Louisiana category is "African American" but for the purposes of this paper we assume the state references all black students.
21. *Id.*
22. In June 2012, The Civil District Court for the Parish of Orleans ruled the terminations, holding both OPSB and the DOE jointly liable "in solidarity." http://www.nopsejustice.com/judgement/Trial%20Court%20Judgment%20June%2020%202012.pdf
23. See current list at: http://www.rsdla.net/About_the_RSD/Schools.aspx
24. http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201008_SchoolReformCities/Fordham_SchoolReform_Final_Complete.pdf
25. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Abrams v. United States,* 1919.
26. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/educatingblackboys11rev.pdf
27. *Id.* The discrimination cuts both ways, "Black boys are 2.5 times less likely to be enrolled in gifted and talented programs, even if their prior achievement reflects the ability to succeed."
28. http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201008_SchoolReformCities/Fordham_SchoolReform_Final_Complete.pdf

CONCLUSION

THE MISSION of each charter school is different but the mission of government educational entities, whether at the federal, state or local level, should be consistent: become a school improvement organization with a primary mission of removing obstacles that impede all schools from benefiting the students they serve. While the post-Katrina reform effort was not perfect and will continue to unfold in the coming decades, the state got its mission right. And, the keys to the RSD's successes in its mission both in New Orleans and in greater Louisiana were the ability and wisdom to employ multiple interventions. New Orleans' success was for the most part due to its liberation of schools, largely through chartering, into an organic structure that allowed them to adapt. However, an honest assessment of each situation is paramount. Chartering one or two schools in a small district may destabilize the entire district. Limiting the tools in a takeover district's toolbox primarily to chartering likewise would be shortsighted and ignores the RSD's success with its direct-run and MOU schools.

Careful use and a balanced implementation of charters, coupled with sound management and always faithful application of best practices in traditional schools, makes perfect sense. Beyond the soundness of this approach, it also provides a common ground for education activists who find themselves polarized at opposite ends of what is becoming an increasingly political and bitter debate. More and more stakeholders are beginning to agree that the battle between charter and direct-run public schools has evolved from an intellectual discussion to something better resembling a street brawl. The shouting must stop, as the end goal of both systems is to provide the best education possible for every child. A blended, agnostic approach may indeed be the best "school choice."

BIOGRAPHIES

PAUL G. VALLAS is known within the education community as a turnaround expert. He has a history of reforming and rebuilding school districts in the wake of both natural and man-made disasters. He recently completed his tenure as superintendent of the Recovery School District of Louisiana, where he played a critical leadership role in building a new public school system in the hurricane-ravaged city where 80% of the children live below the poverty level and in developing a school intervention system to help turn around failing schools across the state. In addition to other projects, he is now engaged in a turnaround in the largest school system in Connecticut, Bridgeport Public Schools, where high school graduation rates and other indicators lag far below national averages.

Mr. Vallas' success in New Orleans followed his similar successes in other troubled districts in Chicago and Philadelphia. In both districts test scores improved every year at rates that exceeded state growth, budget deficits were eliminated and record-setting school construction programs were implemented. For example, in Chicago he eliminated a projected $1.25 billion budget gap, leaving the district with more than $300 million in reserves and created the nation's largest school construction program. The $3 billion construction program built 76 new schools and renovated more than 350 others in just six years.

In Philadelphia, Mr. Vallas' curriculum and instruction program, which remains intact today, has produced a nationally unprecedented nine years of test score growth that has seen math scores triple and reading scores more than double. Mr. Vallas also eliminated a large budget deficit in Philadelphia, while overseeing that district's largest school construction program ever, at more than $1.7 billion.

Concurrent with his other responsibilities, Mr. Vallas was appointed to two large international projects. In the first, he was asked to serve as the lead education consultant to the Government of Haiti ("GOH") in the wake of the January 12, 2010 earthquake, under the auspices of the Inter American Development Bank. He is today still advising the GOH as it seeks to create a publicly subsidized school system, that will, for the first time ever, make education accessible to all of Haiti's children.

The second project came at the invitation of the Government of Chile, which asked Mr. Vallas to assume responsibility for turning around and improving test scores in 1,100 of Chile's lowest performing schools. Under Mr. Vallas' leadership in Santiago, enormous institutional changes have been achieved, while at the same time the schools are beginning to see the results of his work.

Prior to Mr. Vallas' work in the education sector, he served as Director of the City of Chicago's Office of Budget and Management, turning around city finances and securing bond rating upgrades, while financing the City's largest investment in infrastructure repairs and the largest expansion of public safety services in the City's history.

One of Mr. Vallas' proudest achievements was the opportunity to serve 13 years in the Illinois National Guard. He has three sons, two who are currently serving in the military, including his oldest son who just recently returned safely from active duty in Afghanistan as a combat medic attached to the 1st Marine Division.

TRESSA PANKOVITS is an attorney and former television/radio journalist who has served as chief of staff to Mr. Vallas for several years, managing projects that are external to his day-to-day duties managing school districts. Ms. Pankovits has and continues to provide strategic and substantive support to Mr. Vallas regarding his work in Haiti, Chile, and other locations, both domestic and international, where he and his team have been invited to provide consulting services regarding the rebuilding and reformation of school systems. Ms. Pankovits coordinates all policy research, advocacy materials and document preparation for the Vallas team's presentations before governmental, NGO, and philanthropic audiences. Through her work with Mr. Vallas, Ms. Pankovits has become

well versed in educational reform strategies and implementation of reform projects on a large scale.

Prior to joining Mr. Vallas' team, Ms. Pankovits worked as an associate at a commercial litigation law firm in Chicago, where she concentrated on contract litigation and drafting, intellectual property and trade secrets, and municipal and administrative law. She graduated with honors from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago Kent College of Law, where she served on the Law Review.

Prior to attending law school, Ms. Pankovits worked as a journalist in television and radio, holding positions with ABC, CBS and Chicago Tribune-owned stations. As a reporter she provided extensive coverage of the Chicago Public School system and state and local government, for which she was honored with several journalism awards.

KENT H. HUGHES is currently the Director of the Program on America and the Global Economy (PAGE) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He also serves as the consulting director of the Center's Global Energy Initiative. As part of the PAGE agenda, he published a book, *Building the Next American Century: The Past and Future of American Economic Competitiveness* (Wilson Center Press 2005), which emphasizes the importance of innovation and education to America's future.

Prior to joining the Center, Dr. Hughes served as Associate Deputy Secretary at the U.S. Department of Commerce, president of the private sector Council on Competitiveness, and in a number of senior positions with the U.S. Congress. Prior to his congressional service, Dr. Hughes served as a staff attorney for the Urban Law Institute. He was also an International Legal Center Fellow and Latin American Teaching Fellow in Brazil where he worked on a reform of Brazilian legal education.

Dr. Hughes holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Washington University, a LL.B. from Harvard Law School and a B.A. in Political and Economic Institutions from Yale University. He is a member of the D.C. Bar, American Bar Association and the American Economic Association.

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