NEPC
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Newsletter

New Study Places NOLA Portfolio Schools Within a History of Anti-Black Racism

Eighteen years ago this month, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, forever altering both the city and its public schools, which were converted to the nation's first and only (almost) all-charter system.

In a study published last month in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal, Elizabeth K. Jeffers of the University of New Orleans and NEPC Fellow Adrienne D. Dixson of the University of Kentucky, draw upon case studies of two historically Black high schools to trace the impact of the "portfolio model" policy changes on the city's large and long-standing Black community.

Based upon field notes, documents, data, and more than 45 hours of interviews with 30 participants collected over the course of two years (2015 to 2017), the authors contend that important similarities exist between the plantations where enslaved Black people forced to live and work and the portfolio-management school choice model that replaced New Orleans' traditional public schools. They describe in particular how both types of systems weaken collective voice and power.

For example, older community members interviewed for the study recalled how, prior to the storm, children from the same families and neighborhoods would attend the same schools, often walking together to buildings that housed multiple grade levels. The new choice models instead dispersed children from the same families and models throughout the city. Some

students described being "shipped" across town. "You are breaking down families again," a veteran Black educator remarked. "You are separating the children [and] sending them to different schools. You are *breaking up the pack*. So, now, we don't have the power, and that's the whole intention to make me weak."

Even within schools, students said they were isolated from one another. One student who graduated in 2017 noted that she rarely did group work in class. Others remarked that students in different grade levels were kept separate, entering and exiting from different doorways and eating at different times of day. When charters divided the high schools into multiple small schools, students in each academy were restricted to certain areas of the building and rarely had a chance to interact on campus.

Jeffers and Dixson suggest this is similar to slaveholders' efforts to break up Black families and kinship groups while ignoring the more collective norms of African cultures where the enslaved people originated: "In short, plantation logics reflect Eurocentric, White supremacist ideology that places a primacy on individual property rights rather than the African episteme and collective conscious."

Parents interviewed for the study expressed frustration with the White, often novice teachers who became the majority after the storm, replacing a majority Black and much more experienced teaching force. While the two focal schools' Black faculty may have communicated in person and often had deep roots in the community, the White charter school faculties that replaced them post-Katrina tended to use robocalls, text messages and emails that some parents found dehumanizing.

"It was almost like she was a robot, and she would not look me in my eyes," one Black parent said of her encounter with a White charter school administrator.

> No matter what I asked her, it was like she had memorized everything and was regurgitating. "Okay, well, according to such and such," and I'm just looking—I'm just like: "Is she human?" It was the weirdest thing I have ever seen. Like: "Hello. I'm right here."

The city's majority Black public school population also lost voting power, as charters are each governed by individual boards that are not typically elected. The elected New Orleans school board, as a result, has little to no authority over curricula, hiring, school discipline, and other key aspects of running the schools.

"It is crucial to note that New Orleans is currently the only such governance structure in the country despite attempts to replicate it elsewhere," Jeffers and Dixson note. "More precisely, the plantation complex helps illustrate that the education marketplace (including school closures) is not simply about academic achievement or fiscal and operational efficiency. From our perspective, it is about solidifying transhistorical anti-Black racism."

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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