

Post-Katrina New Orleans: A Step Forward, but not a Model

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I'm glad my friends at the influential Thomas B. Fordham Institute (edexcellence.net) have concluded that, "[New Orleans: A success story? Yes. A national model? Maybe not.](#)" I'm going further: 'yes, an improvement on Pre-Katrina, but definitely not a model.' We can learn a lot from the New Orleans story, and we need to, but we've learned enough already to know we should NOT copy it.

The New Orleans story demonstrates, again, for education that we need a price system to orchestrate the provision of goods and services. Trying to fudge – to get by without the opportunity/need signaling and resource allocation work achieved passively by price change and market entry/exit – typically yields a huge mess, and often disastrous unintended consequences.

One of those from New Orleans could be a poisoning of the school choice well. What's going on there is being called school choice in action. But's it's really not, or only barely. A new assignment system based on the [OneApp computer program](#) replaced the Pre-Katrina, traditional attendance zone-based assignment system. Yes, One-App yields 71% of applicants their first choice, but the nature of the choices is severely constrained by the Louisiana Charter Law (priceless-ness, zero-profit, mission-based selective admissions prohibited, every campus must be capable of addressing nearly all disabilities). I've discussed those issues [previously](#).

The possibility of a severe special needs applicant creates "terrible financial risks" for chartered public schools (CPS), not to mention a huge distraction from a specialized mission. CPS must form networks to at least partially avoid that risk. Chartered schools can be sued or

closed for failure to provide adequate services for all special needs applicants. One such closure was a prominent part of the [Education Week feature article](#), with the sub-text being that such sudden closures are a major part of the chaotic New Orleans choice process. Without the price system to orchestrate the appropriate diverse mix of instructional approaches, there is no way to know which instructional needs are most in need of expansion, and then drive provision of them.

Beyond reducing the number of applications parents must file, another OneApp objective is to increase equity; to eliminate the advantages of possible connections, side payments, and better shopping skills. Left unsaid is that those things only matter in the face of shortages, which result from pricelessness. I've [discussed how](#) existing public and private funding should deal with the equity issues raised by market determination of heavily subsidized, low, mostly zero, but not 'zero only', tuition prices.

In a political world where battle is waged in 30-second bites, the establishment's spin-meisters can use the New Orleans story to create a partial truth / white lie message that parental choice creates costly chaos. A situation wherein "[Choice Doesn't Feel Like a Choice](#)" is a potential political feasibility disaster for the school system transformation we need.