

Sadly, Another Poster Child for School System Change Found Wanting

John Merrifield
April 22, 2014

Advocates of school choice-driven school system reform [over-sold the policies implemented in Milwaukee](#), and they seem poised to repeat that mistake by over-selling the policies implemented in New Orleans. Milwaukee implemented a priceless tuition voucher program, yet despite its numerous market force-stifling restrictions, Milwaukee became the poster child of market-based school system reform. Only low income families qualify, and participating private schools most offer a religion content free option to voucher users. For most of its 22-year history, student participation was capped and for-profit schools were not eligible to enroll voucher users. The voucher is worth about 60% of per pupil public school spending.

The post-Katrina New Orleans system (NOLA) is also profitless and priceless. Like chartered public schools in all states, Louisiana sets tuition at zero, and the legislature decides the per pupil payments to charter operators. And Louisiana has a “weak” charter law. The Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter organization gives the Louisiana charter law a [grade of ‘C’](#). There are several charter school-authorizing laws that regulate charter school start-up a lot less than Louisiana. Louisiana bans chartering of online schooling.

About [91% of NOLA public schoolchildren](#) attend chartered public schools, which insulates the NOLA schools from local politics. But charter school accountability to charter authorizers and customers does not assure school choiceworthiness, or even that the menu of schooling options amounts to the genuine school choice needed by diverse student populations. The waitlists generated by price control (pricelessness) attenuate the accountability to customers. That’s where a dynamic price system and the profit motive would come in; to eliminate shortages and signal schooling entrepreneurs when to expand the menu, generally, and which specialized schooling

options to add to the current menu. Perhaps because of controlled entry, price control, and/or a high rate of charter formation through conversion of traditional public schools to charters, none of the charters aimed to specialize, thematically or pedagogically, according to NOLA school system officials that attended the 2nd Annual School Choice and Reform International Academic Conference (January, 2013 in Fort Lauderdale, FL). Since, nationally, about half of chartered public schools do specialize, that was shocking (explanation, still undetermined), and it does not bode well for the needed huge improvement in engagement of diverse children in high value learning.

Compared to some benchmarks, the transformation of the NOLA system from one dominated by traditional public schools to one dominated by chartered public schools has produced some improvements in academic outcomes, but the bottom line, and the description of it, is still shockingly bad. When NOLA school system officials note that only a third of the city's kids are in high-quality schools, are they asserting that all schools should be good choices for all children; something that never has been and never will be? Sadly, it would seem so. It is the [pervasive, devastating one-dimension fallacy](#) that yields one-size-fits-all thinking even among people that agree that one size cannot fit all; the kind of thinking that will perpetuate the low rates of engagement produced by traditional public schools.

The former New Schools for New Orleans CEO, Neerav [Kingsland, left his NOLA](#) post to spread NOLA-style reform to other urban areas, which may make some systems better, but it may directly and indirectly forestall the much more productive transformations I have been arguing for; a system that uses market-driven price change and the profit motive to create the dynamic menu of schooling options that is as diverse as the engagement factors present in the schoolchildren population.