DOCUMENT(S) REVIEWED:	"Fix the City Schools: Moving All Schools to Charter-Like Autonomy"
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Summary of Review

A recent report from the Reason Foundation argues for significant changes in how public education is organized and delivered in large cities. The report argues that city schools should move toward a "portfolio" of schools model. In such a model, the district does not necessarily operate schools, but instead focuses on closing low-performing schools and opening new ones under the management of autonomous people or corporations. The report cites improvements in student achievement in New Orleans that have accompanied a substantial shift in the city towards charter and autonomous schools. However, the heavy reliance on New Orleans is a significant weakness in this report, as there are myriad reasons unrelated to the portfolio approach that likely explain some or all of the gains, including substantial population shift of low-income children post-Hurricane Katrina and a significant increase in resources. The findings from New Orleans are supplemented by examples from other cities, but these examples and other arguments throughout the report rest not on systematic research but instead on carefully selected examples intended to support a particular perspective.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent report for the Reason Foundation, entitled *Fix the City Schools: Moving All Schools to Charter-Like Autonomy,* Lisa Snell argues for dramatic changes in the organization and delivery of publicly funded urban education.[1] Her ideas are closely linked to some of the changes happening in large cities, including Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and New Orleans. Those cities have begun to shift away from a centralized bureaucracy that directly manages a relatively uniform set of schools, moving toward a model in which the central office oversees a "portfolio" of schools. Schools within the portfolio offer diverse organizational and curricular themes and include, as service providers, traditional public schools, private organizations, and charter schools. Professor Paul Hill of the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Seattle has been the leading advocate of the portfolio management approach.[2] Districts adopting a portfolio model have schools that "are not assumed to be permanent but contingent," and poorly performing schools are to be closed.[3]

Despite minimal evidence of success, at least to date, politicians from the left and right (including Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama), as well as prominent educational funders, have held up these districts as models for district reform. This new report advocates for a form of a portfolio model in which all or most schools are granted broad-based autonomy over staffing, budget and instructional programs, and in which schools are held accountable through the threat of school closure.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

In this report, the author argues that, especially in urban settings, providing all schools in urban districts with autonomy and accountability similar to that found in charter schools will foster school improvement. Charter schools themselves would be among the schools in a district's portfolio, and the other schools in the portfolio would resemble charters in key ways. Such a shift would entail financing schools via a "student-based budgeting" approach, providing schools with revenue rather than particular numbers of staff positions, giving school principals additional autonomy, moving to a fully "open enrollment" system for allocating students to schools, and closing persistently low-performing schools instead of seeking to improve them. Snell also argues for allowing parents to request a school be restructured, reforming collective bargaining, evaluating teachers without regard to seniority (but with attention to student performance), and publishing detailed information about district budgeting.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

A significant basis for the report's argument is evidence of improvements in student achievement in New Orleans. The author attributes these reported improvements primarily to the post-Katrina significant shifts in that city to a highly decentralized system dominated by charter schools (now serving roughly 60% of the city's students) and traditional public schools with greater autonomy. While the New Orleans case is used as the primary basis for arguing for the need to

move toward systems of autonomous schools, the report also offers a variety of other examples of cities that have adopted some of its recommendations. For example, the report describes reforms in New York City that offer schools greater autonomy, changes in Oakland and other cities that provide principals with greater control of budget decisions, increases in school choice in Baltimore, and examples of school closings in Denver.

IV.   THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The primary data for this report come from newspaper accounts, advocacy pieces, and the Reason Foundation's own publications. Snell does not draw on original pieces of research. In some cases, she addresses issues that have been assessed in high-quality research, but neglects to include that research or its findings. For example, she argues that closing schools can have a positive effect on student achievement, citing internal (and not publicly available) analyses from Denver. Research out of the University of Colorado suggests a more complicated story for students from one school closed by the Denver Public Schools.[4] As well, the author does not cite the recent report from the Consortium on Chicago School Research. That report, *When Schools Close*, found that school closings had a negative impact on student achievement unless students transferred to substantially higher-performing schools.[5]

Implicit in the discussion of New Orleans, as well as the report as a whole, is the assumption that moving to charter status will lead to improved student achievement. However, Snell offers little evidence (other than that from New Orleans) to support this assumption. The largest-scale careful analysis that has been published to date, out of Stanford University, suggests a more mixed picture.

Seventeen percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than comparison public schools, while 37% of charter schools showed gains that were worse than the comparison public schools (46% showed no significant difference).[6] This finding that charters do not on average show an academic benefit is consistent with the overall research concerning charter school effects.

V.   REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS

The New Orleans Story

As noted, this report rests heavily on findings from New Orleans to justify the sweeping changes it proposes. Snell argues that "New Orleans students have seen rapid improvement because all schools are charters or charter-like" (p. 3).[7] However, while improvement in New Orleans is encouraging, the achievement story is a complicated one, and it is difficult to attribute the increases—for at least three reasons.

First, as the report describes, New Orleans school performance scores went up nearly 10 points from 2004-05 to 2007-08 (from 56.9 to 66.4), a significant increase (although one that still left the city far below the state average in 2008 of 86.3). However, similar improvements are found in the years prior to Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans at the end of August in 2005 and which ushered in the dramatic changes to the school system. From 2002 to 2005, school performance scores in the city also rose about 10 points.[8] As well, during both the pre-Katrina and the post-Katrina periods, scores went up in many of the state's other school districts and in the state as a whole.[9] For example, from 2008 to 2009, 79% of schools in the state improved their school performance scores.[10]

Second, the devastation from Hurricane Katrina led to massive out-migration from the city, with a disproportionate impact on the city's poorest residents. Prior to Katrina, New Orleans public schools enrolled roughly 65,000 students. Even after several years of growth following the precipitous drop post-Katrina, public schools in the district only enrolled a total of roughly 38,000 by October 2009.[11] This shift in population has resulted in a city that has a smaller proportion of families living in extreme poverty (household incomes lower than $10,000) than pre-Katrina (12.3% in 2005 versus 6.4% in 2007), as well as fewer minors living in poverty (38.1% in 2005 vs. 31.4% in 2007).[12] Consistent with general findings, an analysis by the Cowen Institute found a very strong relationship between the percentage of students eligible for free lunch and Louisiana school performance scores.[13] Thus, some of the achievement gains in New Orleans are likely due to the city's schools serving a smaller proportion of students facing serious financial issues in their homes.

Finally, the resources available to public schools post-Katrina have been significantly greater than pre-Katrina. These resources have been critical to rebuilding a devastated school system. But until the current student outcome improvements are able to continue without these higher funds, it will be hard to attribute achievement gains to the structure of the system, as opposed to the available resources. The Cowen Institute's analysis of public school spending in New Orleans pre- and post-Katrina found that per-pupil public spending pre-Katrina was only slightly higher than average spending statewide, while spending in 2007-08 was more than 50% higher than the state average.[14] Much of this increased funding came through federal "restart" monies following Katrina. Millions of dollars from foundations have also flowed to New Orleans since the hurricane,

both directly to the city's two school governing authorities and individual schools, and indirectly to organizations providing resources and support to those schools. For example, in December of 2007, the bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Doris and Donald Fisher Foundation announced donations of $17.5 million to organizations working to improve New Orleans Schools; this is only a portion of the money that has flowed to this relatively small district.[15] In the 2009-10 school year, all public schools in the district experienced significant cuts because of the cessation of federal restart money as well as stagnant state funding; it is unclear how long foundation funding will be sustained at current levels or what additional cuts the loss of that money would require.

The reforms and trends in New Orleans are worth noting, and they certainly warrant continued attention given the dramatic changes in the city's schools. However, taken together, there are a host of reasons to question the report's assumption that achievement gains in New Orleans are a direct result of the significant systemic changes that the city has experienced. Making broad recommendations for national change based on these results seems preliminary at best.

Examples of Policies, Not Successes

The report describes a number of interesting policy approaches in different cities that correspond to changes that the author is advocating. However, for most of these examples, the report does not cite actual research showing any link between those policy changes and improved student performance or outcomes. Nor does the report offer any original analyses. Instead, the author often cites newspaper accounts or, in some cases, provides no sources at all. Table 1 presents

Table 1: Primary Examples of City Policy Changes, Used as a Basis for the Report's Recommendations

	Policy Change	Link with outcomes	Comments
New Orleans	Significant enhanced autonomy for schools and dramatic increase in number of charter schools	Improvements in student achievement	Does not address critical contextual factors specific to New Orleans, including pre-reform improvements in achievement, changes in district demographics and dramatic increases in funding post-Katrina
New York City	Shifts to greater school-level empowerment and changes in budgeting approach	85% of empowered schools meeting performance targets	Does not address: percent of schools meeting performance targets prior to empowerment, reasons why these schools were selected for empowerment, percent of "non-empowered" schools meeting performance targets, or demographics of schools receiving empowerment
Oakland	Increases in budgeting discretion at school level, central office cuts	None	No link with positive student outcomes
Boston	Greater principal discretion over budget, changes in collective bargaining for pilot schools	None	No link with positive student outcomes
St Paul, MN	Choice-based enrollment	None	No link with positive student outcomes
Poudre School District (Fort Collins, Colorado)	Choice-based enrollment	None	No link with positive student outcomes
Baltimore	Choice-based enrollment	District reports that families are not choosing lowest-performing schools	Findings based on newspaper accounts of statements by district, rather than on research
Denver	School closure as accountability mechanism	District reports cost savings and higher performance for students who left schools closed for poor performance	Data on these findings are not publicly available, and therefore cannot be validated

Examples are listed in the order used in the report.

some of the report's primary examples and describes the tenuous or non-existent evidence used to support the report's proposals.

VI.   REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

As described above, this report offers no strong evidence in support of the proposals it advocates. It relies instead on purported improvements in New Orleans that have not been subjected to careful analysis. And it relies on examples of reforms in other cities that often include little or nothing about the impact of the reforms on students, families or the city as a whole.

VII.   USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

This report may prove useful for advocates of the approaches it describes, as it offers some concrete ideas (and lists places to seek more information) about how to implement the kinds of reforms discussed. However, the lack of any meaningful research foundation for the conclusion the proposed reforms would have positive effects limits the use of this piece for policy makers or others trying to determine the best research-based strategies for improving urban schools.

Notes and References

[1] Snell, L. (2010). *Fix the city schools: Moving all schools to charter-like autonomy*. Los Angeles: Reason Foundation. Retrieved April 9, 2010, from http://reason.org/files/pb87_fix_schools_charters.pdf

[2] Hill, P. T., Campbell, C., Menefee-Libey, D., Dusseault, B., DeArmond, M., & Gross, B. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

[3] Hill, P. T., Campbell, C., Menefee-Libey, D., Dusseault, B., DeArmond, M., & Gross, B. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, p. 1.

[4] Meyer, J. P. (2009, May 24). High school interrupted for Manual students. *Denver Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2010, from http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci_12438681.

[5] Gwynne, J., & de la Torre, M. (2009). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research. See also a recent review of research on school closures: Sunderman, G. L., & Payne, A. (2009). *Does closing schools cause educational harm? A review of the research.* Washington, DC: Mid-Atlantic Equity Center.

[6] Other recent evidence on charter schools in Louisiana (many of which are located in New Orleans), also suggests positive developments are occurring there. See

CREDO. (2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

[7] CREDO. (2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

[8] Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. (2009). *Public school performance in New Orleans: A supplement to the 2008 State of Public Education in New Orleans Report*. New Orleans, LA: Author.

[9] Schwam-Baird, M. and Mogg, L. (Forthcoming, Spring 2010). Is education reform in New Orleans working? A few facts swimming in a sea of unknowns. *Loyola University New Orleans Journal of Public Interest Law*, 11(2).

[10] Louisiana Department of Education (2009, October 13). Student, school and district gains result in all-time highest state performance score. Retrieved April 7, 2010, from, http://doe.louisiana.gov/lde/comm/pressrelease.aspx?PR=1339.

[11] Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. (2010). *The state of public education in New Orleans: 2010 report*. New Orleans, LA: Author.

[12] Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. (2009). *Public school performance in New Orleans: A supplement to the 2008 State of Public Education in New Orleans Report*. New Orleans, LA: Author.

[13] Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University (2010). *The state of public education in Louisiana*. New Orleans, LA: Author.

[14] This analysis is based on "current expenditures," which they "defined as total expenditures minus equipment costs, facilities acquisitions and construction services costs and debt service costs." Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. (2010). *The state of public education in New Orleans: 2010 report*. New Orleans, LA: Author, p. 18.

[15] Simon, D. (2007, December 12). Millions headed for N.O. schools. *Times-Picayune*. Retrieved April 10, 2010, from http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2007/12/millions_headed_for_no_schools.html.