Introduction

*A Total Flim-flam*

With the democratic process, you can see what’s really going on. We are losing voice. We are losing control over what we say we want to happen. As for electing people to represent us, they no longer have the authority to do so by law.

—Reverend Willie Calhoun Jr., community organizer, New Orleans

John McDonogh High School, known as “John Mac” to locals, opened as Esplanade High School in 1912 on the outskirts of the French Quarter in New Orleans. It was an all-girls school until 1952, when it began to enroll white boys. It was considered one of the best high schools in the city until the courts finally required public schools to integrate in the late 1960s and the city largely abandoned its public schools. By 1975, white enrollment in New Orleans public schools was half what it had been in 1961, when white families began to move to the suburbs or enroll in private schools. The next thirty years was a story of public corruption, disinvestment, and declining quality in New Orleans public schools, including John Mac.

A former teacher recounted his first year at John Mac in 2002, with its broken lab benches, cracked linoleum tiles, holes in the floor, jerry-rigged fixes of major maintenance issues, and mice dropping from the ceiling during class. He also noted the “increasing regularity of daily announcements that noted the passing of a former John Mac student whose life had met a violent end.” In 2003, in what was described as a gang killing, four young people entered John Mac’s packed school gymnasium with a semiautomatic assault rifle and opened fire, killing one fifteen-year-old and wounding three others. The shooting made national news and became infamous in New Orleans. For white residents, the story of John Mac High School was a quintessential example of what was wrong with New Orleans schools: run-down facilities populated by poor, Black children who were prone to violence and Black teachers and administrators who cared more about their benefits and
unions than the children they were charged with serving. For the community of alumni, neighbors, students, and parents, John Mac was a victim of the city’s neglect, the criminalization of the Black community, and the lack of economic opportunity for Black people that drove violence and “poor performance.” The battle over John Mac in the wake of Hurricane Katrina would place these opposing perspectives at center stage.

When Katrina caused the floodwalls around Lake Pontchartrain to fail in 2005, many people believed it was an opportunity to “fix,” once and for all, public schools such as John Mac. Eighty percent of the city flooded, and nearly all residents were forced to evacuate, some for a few days, but most for weeks or months; far too many took years to make their way home, and many have never returned. To get the city back on its feet, officials knew they needed schools. Two months after the storm, the Louisiana State Legislature paved the way for the state body authorized to take over failing schools, the Recovery School District (RSD), to take control of nearly all the public schools in New Orleans. A year after Katrina, thirty-five of fifty-six public schools had transformed into charter schools. In 2020, all the public schools were charters.

The most common narratives about how this transformation happened begin with the storm. Several prominent scholars propose that in its devastation, Katrina was a catalyst for change in a city where reforms had been blocked by an intransigent local board and a citizenry that revered its schools so much that it was the “last place on earth one would have expected innovation in the schools.” The new system’s architects and advocates contend that the reforms were born of necessity to get schools back online quickly in the wake of the hurricane. Moreover, they argue that the proof of its success is in the pudding. Test scores and graduation rates are up, and polls show that parents want school choice and are satisfied with the system. Other narratives focus on the idea of “disaster capitalism”: that reformers used Katrina’s destruction as an opportunity to take advantage of the Black community’s displacement and loss for their own profit and political advancement.

This book tells a different story of how this transformation happened. It is based in theories of political behavior and policy change, focusing on how political minorities disrupt systems to create change and keep reforms in place, and the predictable political effects—exclusion, frustration, and resignation on the part of those most directly affected. I argue that the intentional gradual change in the decade preceding Katrina made it possible for the state to take control of New Orleans schools quickly and easily. The reforms had inched along incrementally at the state level for years, creating an apparatus—the RSD—and a system of measuring performance and an accountability regime that made the takeover logistically possible. Moreover, the rhetoric that
accompanied these changes slowly and methodically led elected officials and regular citizens alike to believe that school choice and charter schools were the only way forward and that these neoliberal reforms would rapidly transform the city’s schools. The reformers believed that the ends would justify the means. If certain groups had to be excluded, silenced, or demeaned to make the system better for young people, then they would be vindicated in the end, and opponents would come around.

These reforms were not unique to Louisiana, of course, but have not resulted in the wholesale shift to private governance and management in other cities that we see in New Orleans. It is undeniable that Katrina provided the opportunity for reformers to put their ideas on steroids. I do not entirely dispute the existing narratives that begin with the storm. Rather, I argue that they do not tell the whole story. The stage was set and the actors were ready long before the storm. It is important to understand these pre-Katrina moves for many reasons. In addition to the policies themselves are the networks and relationships that were built during that time that were central to the maintenance of the reforms after Hurricane Katrina. The patterns of exclusion and the framing of their stories in the media developed during this period provided a roadmap for the immediate and long-term aftermath of the hurricane. Further, the pre-Katrina reforms are a harbinger to other cities undergoing substantial reform—they are one “opportunity” away from a similar wholesale transformation. Indeed, the architects of this system and its financial backers have been busy selling and financing this model around the United States, using the so-called success in New Orleans as their evidence of what is possible elsewhere.

Contemporary education reform in New Orleans, as in most urban centers, cannot be divorced from its history of racial oppression. The irony of the reform movement is that its architects framed it as a movement on behalf of marginalized, oft forgotten, and overlooked Black children while simultaneously excluding their parents’ voices and ignoring the effects of these policies on the members of this community. Both before and after Katrina, white reformers purposely excluded Black educators, community members, and parents. This was part of a “longer historical narrative in which White institutions generate exclusionary social networks, then disrupt and devalue Black social capital while bemoaning the failure of the Black community to participate in the system.”5 Parents clearly understand that they were and continue to be shut out of policy-making discussions and yet blamed for the new system’s deficiencies.

This racial division underscores the notion that functioning democracies require “something like a common identity.” If certain members of a demo-
In many ways, the story of John Mac High School exemplifies what has happened in New Orleans. In September 2006 it reopened as a non-charter direct-run school operated by the RSD. According to a teacher who worked there at the time, some classes were as large as one hundred students; there were no computers, textbooks, or water fountains and no school phone. There
were more security guards than teachers. Students were subject to searches and were escorted to the bathroom. For nearly six years, neighborhood residents, students, parents, alumni, and community activists worked with the RSD to have the building renovated and prevent John Mac from being “chartered.”

The African American communities fighting to maintain local control of schools such as John Mac, which had been nearly all Black for decades, did not trust the people they viewed as outsiders who came into town without any knowledge of the history, culture, or sense of community that these schools helped to maintain. Their opposition to charter schools was not simply a knee-jerk reaction against change. Rather, their reluctance to buy in to the reforms was built on the skepticism that came with decades, if not centuries, of benign neglect and overt racism. Whites had abandoned the public schools years earlier, and now, in the wake of a devastating disaster, it seemed that they wanted to turn these predominantly Black public schools over to outside agencies who were going to replace the Black teachers, administrators, and elected officials who governed and worked in the schools with non-native white folks who had no real knowledge of or concern for the communities they were supposed to serve.

On the other side were the reformers, a group led by, though not exclusively composed of, affluent whites. Some had been elected recently to the local school board. Others had served in appointed positions in K–12 education at the state level. Still others were entrepreneurs with limited experience in education, some of whom were native New Orleanians, but many moved to the city specifically to get involved in the reform movement. The reformers wholeheartedly believed in the power of school choice to improve school quality and wanted to experiment with innovative models of organizing and delivering education, especially charter schools. Many were open about their opinions that corrupt school employees and unqualified or unmotivated teachers were to blame for the poor performance in the schools. That so many of these teachers and administrators were Black and so many of the reformers were white underlies a central feature of the reform logic.

Again, the story of John Mac High School is illustrative. In 2011, John White, superintendent of the RSD, selected a national charter operator to begin running the school even as the principal was following White’s directions to propose a plan for teachers, administrators, and alumni to operate the school. The new governance plan was backed by the New Orleans Business Council and the Citizens for One Greater New Orleans, groups composed primarily of white residents of the most affluent neighborhoods in the city. The Future Is Now (FIN) charter operator was founded by Steve Barr, a brash,
The RSD and New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), a charter “incubator,” allocated nearly $1 million to FIN to get John Mac off the ground. Barr described what he found at John Mac this way: “This is what seven generations of crap looks like.” He announced that all the faculty members would be fired, and he traveled to Washington, DC, and New York to meet with prospective teachers, decisions that led the students to walk out in protest. Barr also contracted with the Oprah Winfrey Network to shoot a documentary about his attempt to turn performance around in its first academic year. The show, *Blackboard Wars*, referred to John Mac as “the most dangerous school in America.”

The turnaround story that the show had undoubtedly hoped to chronicle did not materialize. The school’s performance score in 2012–2013 was 9.3 out of 150; it improved only to 16.5 the following year. Enrollment dropped substantially after the documentary aired, leading to cuts in staff and salaries. In the middle of FIN’s second year as John Mac’s operator, in January 2014, the RSD announced that the school would close at the end of that year to undergo extensive renovations and reopen two years later with a new charter operator. Barr left town.

Parents, teachers, students, and concerned citizens rallied and organized to be part of deciding the future of the school. In August 2014, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) directed the Orleans Parish School Board to convene a work group and bring back recommendations for the future of John Mac. Three months later, however, the BESE abruptly changed course and decided to give the RSD the authority to decide the next school operator. In a scene out of *Game of Thrones*, several community members walked in front of board members repeating “shame” as the board voted to undo the work of the community group. Brenda Square, spokeswoman for the Steering Committee, said that working with the RSD was a “total flim-flam” and “a betrayal of every commitment they shared with the John Mac community.” One BESE member who voted against the move stated, “As a black, African American female who sits on this board, I am angry. What you are doing to children that look like me is a disgrace. When you want to kill a community, you strip away its schools.”

Later that year, the RSD announced that the newly renovated building would go to Bricolage Academy, a new charter elementary school with a focus on “diversity by design.” It would be a different school in every way. Bricolage attracts many middle- and upper-class white families and has been touted for its curriculum focused on hands-on science and arts projects. In January 2017, the gym where the infamous 2003 shooting took place was razed. The newly renovated space opened with great fanfare in 2018.
Some see these events as growing pains in a long-term effort that ultimately has been better for the children in the city. An underperforming, dilapidated school with a history of violence was closed, and, in theory, its students (and those who would have attended) had opportunities to attend better schools elsewhere. The building was restored and reopened as a charter school that had proven its success even without a permanent facility. The important questions, they believe, are whether test scores have improved and whether a greater proportion of students are reading at grade level, graduating from high school, and going on to college. If this is the case, then this painful period of school closures will have been worth it.

To others, the John Mac story (and that of several other schools like it) is a familiar tale of dispossession of Black spaces and exclusion of Black voices. Public schools have long been a focal point for social, economic, and racial crises. In New Orleans, schools “offered residents the means to envision competing futures and the state the mechanism to grant certain futures while denying others.” Given the city’s history with segregation and the long fight for integration, the public disinvestment from schools, and the deep disparities in educational opportunities between Black and white children, the reform movement that began in the 1990s and continues to the present is deeply racialized. White reformers refused to accommodate alternative perspectives and failed to see that this refusal would, in turn, affect the educational outcomes they say motivate the reforms.

For the John Mac families, their school was not improved. It was eliminated. Their efforts to organize and play by the rules of the new authorities were pushed aside. There are significant costs to their faith and trust in the schools and in city leadership. Many schools, which act as neighborhood anchors, are gone. Both physical and psychological links to the past have been removed. The students who would have attended John Mac have little chance of getting into a school like Bricolage and, for the most part, are still enrolled in schools with below-average performance scores. Even if some educational outcomes are improved, the price paid in the diminution of the experiences of the least advantaged in school governance and civic participation is real, and it is at least worth admitting and deliberating on this trade-off.

The Main Argument

The main argument of this book is that in the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, there was a slow, deliberate dismantling of the public schools in New Orleans, and the post-Katrina reform processes have predictably left Black parents and residents without a voice and the officials charged with school
governance, most of whom are white, with little accountability. In short, the reforms were made possible only by excluding and sidelining the experiences and preferences of the residents who interact most directly and frequently with school authorities, and they have had expected effects on the character of local democracy in the city.

Reformers did not claim that democracy was a worthwhile sacrifice for the possibility of better schools. Although some have argued that reformers were motivated by a desire to profit from a privatized school system or that they were driven by naked political ambition, most conceived of democracy along classically liberal lines, disregarding racial dynamics, inclusion, or democratic deliberation. They often claimed they were helping to expand opportunities, especially for Black parents, and that their policies enhanced individual liberty. Under their system, parents can apply to any school and are “free” from the constraints of a local school district. They have the “right to choose” their schools. In the name of autonomy, charter schools are free to engage in almost any practice they want, creating a quasi-market with innovative variations of schools that should allow parents to find the best fit for their child. If parents are not satisfied with their school, they can “simply” choose another that suits their values.

These liberal values represent an approach to education that is distinct from the perspectives of many within the Black community. In New Orleans, as in other U.S. cities, Black neighborhood associations, church groups, civil rights organizations, and benevolent aid societies have fought for more than a century for resources for public schools serving African American children. These networks serve as a significant form of Black social capital, which was developed in response to the marginalization of the Black community and to “a political culture of white supremacy.” The white reform movement does not value these institutions and has continued to marginalize Black parents and educators in the years before and since Katrina. They have put in place a system in which “the entire power structure of public education in New Orleans has been recast to represent the views, beliefs, and desires of a White minority.”

This individual-centered, liberal approach to democracy sees government as the primary constraint on liberty. Freedom, however, is often constrained by “the aggregate effects of private decisions on the distribution of opportunity in society and the range of options facing particular individuals.” White Americans who hold fast to concerns about government intrusion tend to see the invisible hand of a market as racially and economically neutral. Democracy and equality of opportunity are limited to freedom of choice, with no regard for the varying constraints on the options for different families. Other models of
democracy prioritize inclusive participation and shared self-government. These models are messier and more contentious. Deliberation and disagreement are messy and time-consuming and require that those with the most advantage must be willing to share power with those who have the least.

Beyond the fact that the liberal approach is deeply racialized, there is also a substantial difference between theory and practice. Applying to any school one wants is cold comfort if the options are limited or the chance of actually enrolling one’s child in these schools is nil. Families that require public transportation, before- or after-school care, and provisions for children with special needs do not have the same options as their counterparts for whom these may be unnecessary or privately contracted. Charter schools may be “free” to decide their own policies, but if these practices routinely discriminate against students with special needs or those whose parents do not understand how the system works, then the disparities from the old system are merely reproduced in the new one, only with less oversight and accountability. The invisible hand has nearly always operated in the United States in ways that leave Black citizens at a disadvantage, and in New Orleans these liberal reforms allow white leaders to “blame Black families for the failure of their model.”

I show not only that those who govern the schools are unrepresentative of the public they serve, but also that these folks, despite controlling millions in taxpayer dollars and the most important public service in a city, do not view their roles as public servants at all. Echoing Reverend Willie Calhoun, elected officials have little authority, and Black parents have little voice. Many parents believe they are stuck and are resentful about the consistent claims by reformers that children in New Orleans have flexibility and choices about their schooling. This is not to say that they were happy with the system before Katrina, and they certainly do not want to go back. If policy makers listened to these voices, they would hear an urgent desire for children to go to school closer to home; to spend less time on buses traversing the perimeter of the city; to focus less on assessment and more on recess and the arts and in learning the history of the place where they are being raised. Parents want a human connection rather than an online system with an algorithm that places their children in schools without regard to their families’ needs, even as white children continue magically to end up only in the highest-performing schools, just as they did prior to Katrina.

This book relies on the theories of policy feedback to examine the emergence, maintenance, and effects of the first all-charter district. I review that literature in each chapter as it relates to each aspect of the reform process. Policies are not only the product of political struggles; they affect politics in ways that influence future public-policy making. Recognizing that policies
themselves “restructure subsequent political processes” highlights that reforms affect political life beyond the intended effects on the problems they aim to solve.19 These reforms were intended to improve the quality of education and the performance of students in New Orleans schools, but the racial and class disparities in the construction of the reforms are reflected in the disproportionalities in how poor, Black parents and community members experience the policies. Reformers established a new coalition that works to maintain the new status quo and advocate against rollbacks. These processes and outcomes send important messages about deservingness and belonging, especially with regard to race, that, in turn, influence the behavior of beneficiaries and the general public, with important implications for democracy.

An Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 explains the events in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I focus primarily on the activities of a small group of elite, mostly white and affluent New Orleanians in the weeks that followed this devastating tragedy. Within three months, the state had passed a law that redefined failing schools in New Orleans (not the entire state) and authorized the state’s RSD to take control of all but about a dozen public schools in the city. The local board also fired nearly all school employees, effectively shutting down the most significant opposition to the forces of privatization and devastating the Black middle class.

Chapter 2 goes back in time to before the storm. Looking at the state laws passed between 1997 and 2005, I demonstrate that the path toward reform began well before Katrina. By 2005, Louisiana had long mandated annual standardized testing and had implemented a grading system for all public schools in the state. The state had paved the way for alternative teacher certification programs to replace traditionally certified instructors and had watered down tenure protections. Most important, Louisiana had developed a mechanism to take control of failing schools and already singled out New Orleans as its target. These moves, approved and implemented long before Katrina was even listed among the named storms for 2005, made it possible for the State Legislature to vote just two months after the storm to change the definition of failing schools and take control of nearly all of New Orleans’ public schools.

Considering the pre-Katrina period in this context complicates the story of responsibility and accountability for the reforms. My analysis shows that New Orleans officials in the State Legislature, including Democrats and Republicans and Black as well as white legislators, voted in favor of these proposals. A
majority of New Orleans voters also supported the creation of the RSD, giving the state the authority to take control of poor-performing schools. A year before Katrina, New Orleans voters elected a reform-minded school board. Opponents of the post-Katrina reforms often claim that these policies were hammered out in secret and were rammed down the throats of the local community. Though there is some truth to this narrative, it neglects to recognize that many residents, including many in the African American community, supported and helped to put the system into place.20

Chapter 3 picks up in 2006 and 2007 and explains how reformers maintained the reforms, often in the face of tremendous pressure to roll back and re-centralize some aspects of the system. They ensured state control for a long period when they wrote the law that took the schools, made changes to the system only when forced to do so, kept items off the agenda to engineer acceptable outcomes outside the public eye, and framed their opponents as selfish “defenders of the status quo.” These tactics prevented critics from making any headway as they pushed back against charters and private governance. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 cast doubt on the argument that the reforms were merely a practical necessity and there was no intention to exclude certain perspectives from decision making. Although some individuals may not have intended to end up with the system as it looks today, there is a lot of evidence that these policies were planned from tip to tail.

The second half of the book turns to the effects of the reforms not on students’ education outcomes but, rather, on governance. Private, hand-selected boards now govern nearly every aspect of K–12 education in New Orleans. Chapter 4 examines these governing boards that handle millions in taxpayer dollars, select school leaders, and are responsible for compliance with federal and state laws. Drawing on my own survey of charter board members, an analysis of meeting minutes, and a look at the compliance of these boards with state meetings laws, I demonstrate that these boards are unrepresentative, lack transparency, and fail to engage the public, and its members are skeptical about their roles as public servants. Even with the serious problems with the elected school board prior to Katrina, these handpicked boards are far from a replacement of the elected board with regard to representation, accountability, and responsiveness. Charter boards provide reformers with a powerful mechanism to maintain the new status quo. The continued marginalization of Black voices, both in terms of those who serve on the boards and in the incorporation of public inquiry and dissent, makes it next to impossible to make meaningful changes to the system.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the feedback of these policies on public opinion, especially that of public school parents. I use evidence from publicly
available surveys and my own studies, including surveys and focus groups. In general, New Orleanians tend to believe the school system has improved. A closer look at these data indicates serious divisions between Black and white residents and between those with kids in public schools and everyone else, suggesting that direct experience with the system is associated with distinctly different beliefs about its fairness. Chapter 5 focuses primarily on these parents’ attitudes and experiences with school enrollment and with school authorities. It shows that parents are frustrated and tired. They believe the system is rigged against them and that the same people who had advantages before the storm have them now. Many parents do not appreciate the (mostly white) folks who have come to the city to “save” them and their children, and they long for high-quality schools in their neighborhoods.

Chapter 6 focuses on how these attitudes about and experiences with schools affect political efficacy and trust. In general, political efficacy and participation in local elections have decreased slightly since Katrina. Trust remains low. The feedback effects are minimal, I conclude, because Black residents had very little trust or faith in city officials to start. The parents with whom I met in focus groups are not surprised that they were excluded from the school decisions and that they continue to be at a disadvantage in this new system. Many are angry, but most are simply resigned. They do not believe things are going to get much better, but they remain hopeful, largely because they feel like they have no other options.

The Conclusion analyzes what this all means for schools and for democracy. One might ask why the attitudes and experiences of parents ought to matter if the reforms are improving educational outcomes. If kids in New Orleans’ public schools are learning more and achieving at higher levels, why should we care about the civic effects of the reforms? The chapter weighs the evidence about improvement in educational outcomes against the findings in this book. The evidence about growth in test scores and other educational outcomes is mixed, at best, and cannot be separated from political attitudes and behavior. The system requires a high degree of buy-in from parents to work as designed, but their lack of faith and continued belief in its inherent inequality influence the choices they make about where their kids go to school and how they engage with these authorities. The support for the system seems to come primarily from those whose children are not in public schools. Further, given the stratification of public and private schools by race, white residents are unlikely to have any real sense of responsibility for public schools. Michael Engel reminds us: “Democratic values are a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for defending the existence of public education.” As the school system in New Orleans has become less and less democratic, it becomes increasingly
difficult for the collective citizenry to be concerned about them and easier to
privatize them and, ultimately, to give up on the enterprise of public educa-
tion altogether.

The Conclusion also provides a few modest policy prescriptions designed
to increase participation among parents of public school children; improve
trust and strengthen their faith that the system is fair; and make the system
more representative, responsive, and easier to navigate. Contrary to reform-
ers’ rhetoric, there are a multitude of policy options; it is not a choice between
what we have now and what we had before. Reformers have made it next to
impossible to unravel the system and return to a traditional neighborhood-
based school district. Even so, there are options that would include more voic-
es in the process and provide greater legitimacy of the system. I encourage
policy makers to consider our democracy as seriously as they say they consider
school performance.

The inequality and racial disparities that continue to characterize pub-
lic education in New Orleans are a function of the inequalities in the local
democracy. Systems that exclude the perspectives and realities of those who are
most directly affected by a policy will only exacerbate inequality. To improve
support for and the functioning of the system, those who have had a tight
grip on power will have to loosen their control. If they refuse, then eventually
parents and other community members will find ways outside the traditional
political process to influence these outcomes.