



April 2013 IRP Podcast featuring Douglas Harris of Tulane University

“Evaluating the Post-Katrina New Orleans School System”

Transcript

[Chancellor] You’re listening to an April 2013 podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I’m Dave Chancellor

In February, Douglas Harris of Tulane University gave an IRP seminar and was kind enough to sit down with me and talk about his work on the school system in New Orleans. Coming out of Hurricane Katrina, most schools in New Orleans were under water and a lot of the administration, teachers, and students had left town. In the recovery, New Orleans has created a public school system that is predominantly made up of charter schools -- approximately 80% of the schools are now charters-- with most of those operating under what’s called the Recovery School District. And, mostly, it seems to be working.

When I began talking to Professor Harris, it was my assumption that the recovery school district was a direct reaction to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. But, that’s not quite the case. . .

[Harris] Actually, it started a little before Katrina so one of the things that people don’t realize is that the recovery school district which is really what houses most of the charter schools existed before the storm. Recovery was meant more as ‘recovery from failure’—right? So it was a way of getting failing schools into a different structure so they could turn around and be more successful. So then—so there were only a few schools in the recovery school district before Katrina hit, and then when Katrina happened, for lots of reasons, there was interest in moving more schools into the recovery district.

[Chancellor] Harris says that this was partly for financial issues—the Orleans Parish School Board had a lot of financial problems and wasn’t necessarily in a position to get a lot of schools up and running quickly.

[Harris] It was felt at the time that to rebuild the city you had to get the schools up and running. Nobody was going to come back if the schools weren’t operating. So, they felt the need to do it very quickly and they thought it would be faster, but simultaneously, I think there was a larger interest in trying to do something big that, like a lot of big cities, the

schools in New Orleans were considered to be for a long time—to be unsuccessful. This was seen as an opportunity to do something big.

[Chancellor] In the Recovery School District or RSD, there are both charter schools and a smaller number of struggling schools run by RSD. The charter schools receive much greater autonomy in return for positive results—mostly better test scores. Many of the news stories about the recovery school district in the last couple of years seem to indicate these charter schools have been a big success. According to Professor Harris? Well, Maybe. . .

[Harris] It's hard to tell. So, the studies that have been done so far focus on finding comparison schools for the charters that are outside the district. So, they're, say, comparing a charter school in New Orleans to a demographically similar school somewhere else and then making that comparison. And that's mostly what's been done so far and making that comparison it does look like the charter schools are doing pretty well in New Orleans.

[Chancellor] One major question that Harris is looking at is whether students are learning more in school after Katrina than they were before. This is a different question than just “are the schools successful” and one that Harris says is harder to answer. He says there are a few reasons for this.

[Harris] One is that the population totally changed. Everybody left and then some people came back and some people who weren't there to begin with moved in-like me-I had recently gone down there so-trying to account for the ways in which the population affected student learning before and after is important. Also the data are not as good, before Katrina, so those are the two big impediments to figuring out what's changed.

[Chancellor] A lot of the Charter Schools, with the most prominent example being KIPP, use a model based on longer school days, a longer school year, regimented behavior standards, and a big emphasis on rewarding students who do well on what Harris calls measurable outcomes. At other schools, there's more differentiation based on subjects... so, arts focused schools, science and technology focused schools, language immersion schools

[Harris] But, beyond that kind of surface level, it's hard to know so part of my hope is to find out more about what the differences really are inside the school and how it really looks different. One of the criticisms of the system—both a criticism and advantage depending on how you look at it is that you've got this test-based accountability system on top of the market-based reforms so the recovery school district is actually a state agency and so, partly for that reason, they're very focused on the test scores in the schools. So that actually makes it harder for schools to differentiate themselves in terms of what they do because they all have to do well on the tests so part of what we'll be looking at is whether there seems to be

evidence of that and whether it's kind of constraining the opportunity to be innovative and try new things in the schools.

[Chancellor] Harris says the charter schools are still dominantly comprised of the most disadvantaged students. In part, he says, this is because the schools that were put in the recovery district were ones that had the lowest test scores to begin with. And, test scores are highly correlated with demographics. Then, many of the charter schools are located in more disadvantaged neighborhoods and students are more likely to go to schools that are close to home.

New Orleans has a pretty unique situation right now. Can any findings from these schools be generalized to other places, especially those with a lot of disadvantaged students?

[Harris] I think there are two differences. One is in the way in which the reforms got put in place. So, that's obviously something that doesn't generalize to anywhere—the impetus for it was the storm while there were certainly other things in the background was almost like the stars aligning for something like this to happen, if you think it's a good thing.

So, there was the financial problem in the traditional district, plus the perceptions that the schools were failing, plus the way the politics were arranged at the time that made it fairly easy to make a strong change—there wasn't a superintendent at the time in the traditional district so there wasn't anyone to lobby against the changes.

So there were all these factors affecting whether and how the thing got put in place and then there's also the issue around—given that you've got this program put in place now—whatever we learn about New Orleans, can it apply to New York and Chicago and other cities?

[Chancellor] Harris says that until you know what sort of effects the reform has had you can't really say why it's had those effects or predict how they might generalize to other cities. But, if the post-Katrina reforms in New Orleans' school system are shown to be successful, there are a few theories as to what might be working in New Orleans' favor.

[Harris] One is that it's primarily a human capital story that you have this influx of Teach for America Teachers and people coming from all over the country—entrepreneurs creating charter schools and so on that you wouldn't have had otherwise. So, just a lot of very smart people have moved to New Orleans.

The second theory is that it's more a test-based accountability story—that you've got more pressure on testing.

And a third is that it's more the market operating—you've got more parental choice, more competition, and the usual economic theory. And there are other theories as well about the funding levels change—lots of other things were changing at the same time. So, trying to tease that out is going to be tricky but it will also speak to whether you can do this somewhere else. It's primarily a human capital story. That's going to be pretty hard to replicate—you can't just create a—the influx of talent that New Orleans received—in another city so easily. New Orleans, it was coming out of the storm, it was a place that people wanted to go to be helpful, it's a fun place to live, it's a nice place to live in a lot of different ways. So, I think it was very easy to attract people down there. They were trying to do it in Baton Rouge, which is just an hour and a half away but it's seen as a very different place so I think if it's a human capital story then it probably—the extension to Baton Rouge isn't going to work as well as it might have working in New Orleans.

[Chancellor] So, in looking for the answers behind any success that New Orleans is seeing, there are big challenges in terms of just measuring how things have changed. Not only does the population and city itself look very different than before Katrina, but there are additionally many different schooling models and administrative structures that vary substantially from school to school. Thanks to Doug Harris for talking about this story. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.