Who Owns O. Perry Walker High School?: A Case Study of Contested Ownership and Survival in the New Orleans Public Schools after Hurricane Katrina

David Hamilton Simons-Jones

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WHO OWNS O. PERRY WALKER HIGH SCHOOL?: A CASE STUDY OF CONTESTED
OWNERSHIP AND SURVIVAL IN THE NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC SCHOOLS AFTER
HURRICANE KATRINA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies

by

David Hamilton Simons-Jones

B.A. Political Science and Classics, Tulane University, 2001

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I am also deeply grateful to my family for their undying love and support. Every one of them knows just the right amount of help to offer and when. I would particularly like to thank my brothers and father, who volunteered to work on rebuilding my house while I put the finishing touches on this.
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Abstract

This ethnographic case study examines O. Perry Walker, a New Orleans high school the state of Louisiana had previously labeled “failing,” during its closure from August 29, 2005 until December 14, 2005, due to the evacuation of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina. This unprecedented evacuation of a major city closed the school, making its reopening the battleground for diverse actors seeking to shape the future of the school and the school system. This research includes interviews with the stakeholders who worked to control, reopen and reform this urban school: teachers, school administrators, elected officials, the California National Guard and staff with a private “turnaround” company, Alvarez and Marsal. It concerns the management of schools facing multiple disasters. The conversion of Walker from a traditional public school to a charter school provides insights into so-called urban school reforms, including ownership, privatization and control of public schools for numerous contentious stakeholders.
Key words

School control, urban school reform, school renaissance, politics and public schools, urban school crisis, schools and disasters, charter schools, New Orleans public schools.
Chapter 1

In the Maelstrom

Background

In the fall of 2005 the slow moving disaster that was the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) encountered the fast-moving disaster of Hurricane Katrina. This is a story of ordinary human beings and one contested school in extraordinary circumstances. I came to the subject as a lover of New Orleans and an advocate for quality public education. I had worked in New Orleans Public Schools for seven years, as a volunteer, tutor, a coordinator of a school renovation program, and as a board member of a non-profit organization that champions and coordinates community resources for public education. Throughout this time I wrestled with how to make a substantive difference in the vast bureaucracy and milieu of problems--ranging from low literacy to outright violence and corruption--that had come to be associated with New Orleans Public Schools. While I still lacked concrete answers, by August of 2005, I was beginning to understand the system.

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans in the early morning hours of August 29, 2005, it devastated New Orleans. Having left the city only twelve hours earlier at the urging of friends and family, I spent a week in Baton Rouge and Dallas, watching intermittent and often conflicting reports of what was happening in New Orleans. I hated to watch the national media coverage; much of it was inaccurate and ill informed—outsiders with no local connections. They didn’t know the street names, the people or the institutions. They didn’t know the names, histories or significance of the flooded neighborhoods that their helicopter camera operators had captured so powerfully. Other coverage was insightfully clear
about the crisis of our nation reflected in the thousands of people left stranded in New Orleans. But I couldn’t not watch. I needed to know what was happening. Reports that the city was “open” again made it to me by the end of September.

I hastened back to New Orleans five weeks after the storm. Within moments of exiting Interstate 10, I found my life tattered and moldy. My house was standing, but it had received four feet of water in the first floor. My neighbors signaled a rescue boat with a flashlight three days after the rising floodwater chased them into my apartment. My office walls and carpet were moldy, plants dead, but most files survived, although I was not allowed to enter.

As I searched for some meaningful way to comprehend what many have categorized as the greatest disaster in the history of an American city—and in this case my city—my questions moved outward. How bad is it? How are the schools? What can I do to help? This work began in conversations with educational leaders trying to pick up the pieces amongst utter chaos and devastation. Like most New Orleanians following Hurricane Katrina, this work has been done while rebuilding. It began to coalesce as I searched for some way of organizing what was going on around me, amidst months of sleeping on other people’s couches, meeting with insurance adjusters, clearing out my flooded home, searching for a working Internet connection, an open grocery store, a gas station or restaurant with no line and a place with a reliable phone connection. Like the actors in this story, I have tried to do what seems right in these incredible circumstances. I write as the City of New Orleans and its schools continue to rebuild. Its future remains uncertain. This record is an attempt to offer a thoughtful and truthful account of events that continue to unfold. It is written by a participant in an historic process who is trying to make some sense out of it and provide some value—or, at the very least, a record—for the future.
This case study looks at O. Perry Walker High School (OPW), a sprawling campus with a capacity of 1570 students, located on General Meyer Avenue in the Algiers neighborhood on the West Bank of New Orleans. It sits next to a campus of a local community college. The school, which opened in 1970, named after the Superintendent who oversaw the continued desegregation of schools during his tenure in the early 1960s, began as highly respected in the community. Its sports teams boasted state-wide success in football and wrestling. A teacher who taught at Walker from 1973 through 2006 claimed it was among the top two high schools in New Orleans.

Numerous respected New Orleans public figures, both white and black, were proud graduates of O. Perry Walker High School. Their ranks included the mayor, C. Ray Nagin (in office during Hurricane Katrina) and the daughters of the 2005-2006 City Council District C representative, Jacquelyn (Jackie) Clarkson.

In the twenty years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the entire New Orleans school system had fallen into turmoil, due to a changing student population, shifting urban economy and new school system policies. Violence at several schools punctuated this decline. In 1992, a student was shot and killed on O. Perry Walker’s campus. Another shooting occurred there in 2005. By 2005, more than 65 percent of O. Perry Walker classes had 27 or more students in them, according to the Louisiana Department of Education’s annual School Report Card, released in 2005. 75 percent of Walker students were testing below grade level in the state’s four core component areas of language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies. From 2003 to 2005, the dropout rate was fluctuating around 10 percent, more than double the Louisiana average. Before Hurricane Katrina, O. Perry Walker High School, like the majority of New Orleans Public Schools, was in crisis.
Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing mass-evacuation of the city left major questions about the future of the city’s public schools, questions that had become increasingly controversial in the year leading up to the storm: Who would manage them? Who would work in them? Who would attend them? And who would control them?

Actors

In October 2005, as the publicly elected school board voted to charter more than twenty schools, thereby releasing them from the oversight of a publicly elected school board, the debate over ownership of the public schools took part in formal and informal forums. A wide range of diverse and often-competing characters and stakeholders claimed ownership in the future of O. Perry Walker and an alleged commitment to quality public education. Many of these actors are common in any discussion of school change: the former principal, Ronald Ayler and the newly hired principal, Mary Laurie; the elected members of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB); United Teachers of New Orleans, the local teacher’s union, which was fighting to maintain its power base in the name of teachers; the former teachers at O. Perry Walker, who were fighting for their jobs and reputations; the school district Superintendent Ora Watson; and the Louisiana Department of Education, particularly the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard, who had long been involved in efforts to “reform” or “takeover” New Orleans Public Schools, depending on one’s perspective.

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1 The first charter school legislation passed in the United States was in Minnesota in 1991. While definitions vary, a charter school is a school run by an appointed board outside of the traditional school system. It allows for greater freedom of curriculum and room for innovation.
Yet, the story of O. Perry Walker also includes several unexpected actors, including local church leaders concerned over the school no longer being under community control; a major international corporate turnaround company, Alvarez and Marsal, who had been brought in only months earlier to clean up the district’s finances and operations; and several district court judges, who were asked to rule on issues of public process and the limits of control of various political entities. The story also includes the Algiers Charter School Association, a newly formed charter school management organization that would oversee O. Perry Walker; the California National Guard, who provided renovations of the school as part of their post-Hurricane relief work; and the Governor, Kathleen Blanco, and the Louisiana State Legislature, who passed laws impacting the future of the school. In the three months following Hurricane Katrina, the voices of several major stakeholders in O. Perry Walker were conspicuously absent from the decision-making process about the future of the school—primarily parents and students. Appendix B includes a more complete and detailed list of major actors in the drama of O. Perry Walker over the twelve months leading up to Hurricane Katrina and the three-and-a-half months following this catastrophe.

The debate over ownership of the schools from September through December, 2005 took up hours of the Orleans Parish School Board meetings as well as finding its way into the Louisiana State Legislature, the federal Department of Education, and numerous conferences around the country. It also became the subject of countless private telephone conversations, corporate planning meetings, military briefings, the front pages of local newspapers, the New Orleans city council chambers, local churches and multiple courtrooms. It became integral to the conversation about the survival of the unique American city that is New Orleans. It continues today.
Methodology

Research for this ethnographic case study has been conducted primarily using discourse analysis and first person participant observation. Data was collected through interviews with stakeholders, including representatives of Alvarez and Marsal, the Orleans Parish School Board, the New Orleans City Council, the California National Guard, the Algiers Charter School Association, and the former and current teachers and staff of O. Perry Walker High School. In addition to interviews, sources include participant observation at O. Perry Walker High School, the Algiers Charter School Association and Orleans Parish School Board meetings, primary documents including meeting minutes of the Orleans Parish School Board and the Algiers Charter School Association, websites and published reports of relevant organizations, including Alvarez and Marsal, the Louisiana State Department of Education, the Algiers Charter School Association, the New Orleans Public Schools, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission Education Committee, and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Secondary sources integral to this study include media reports, including a complete review of references to O. Perry Walker High School in the Times Picayune from March 2005 through March 2006. Additional popular media sources used to form the background of this study and create a chronological narrative of events for historical analysis include the local weekly newspapers: The Gambit Weekly and the Louisiana Weekly; radio and television media: the WWL, WDSU and WWNO news rooms; as well as alternative local, national and international press and on-line publications. This research also draws upon a review of relevant literature on school control and school reform, including books, journals and professional magazines, including Education Week, American School Board Journal, Teacher Magazine and
Rethinking Schools. Finally, several major texts dealing with the history of United States urban development and politics along with the history of American public schools provided a historical foundation for this work.

Rationale and Significance

This research is important for several reasons. The New Orleans Public School system represents the challenges of education in an urban area that would be characterized as struggling according to most quality-of-life and economic indicators. Like most cities around the country, the population of New Orleans was shrinking. According to census data, the 2000 population of New Orleans was 75% of its 1960 population. In 2000, 28 percent of New Orleanians lived in poverty, compared with a national average of 12.4 percent. In 2000, 40 percent of New Orleans children under the age of 18 lived in poverty, compared with a national average of 16.5 percent.

The changing economy of Louisiana dramatically altered the landscape of public schools in New Orleans. The oil boom of the 1980s, which brought in $1.6 billion in oil and gas revenue, 41 percent of the state’s revenue in 1981-1982, had busted. By 1997, Louisiana’s oil and gas industry only produced $723 million, 12 percent of the state’s revenue. Even as oil prices increased over the ensuing decade, it brought no significant revenue spike in the state’s coffers. While the state’s largest city moved from a petroleum economy to a tourist economy, demographics within the public schools shifted so that by 2005, the majority was a poor African American population with eroding public support. By the year 2000, 18.1 percent of school age children in New Orleans were enrolled in private schools, compared to a national average of 10.7 percent. The majority of the middle class left the public schools as the buildings and quality of education have declined for decades (U.S. Census 2000).
Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of an urban area that stretches for 180 square miles, and forced the mass evacuation of more than one million people from their homes, businesses and communities for months. There were 58,000 children who attended New Orleans Public Schools on the Friday before the storm. That Monday, there were none. On November 28, 2005, the first public school reopened; 146 students in kindergarten through eighth grade attended (Ritea, November 29, 2005). On December 14, 2005, 1,324 more students began attending half-days at three West Bank elementary school and two high schools (Ritea, December 15, 2005). It was not until the end of January 2006 that enrollment numbers in New Orleans public schools climbed past the 10,000 mark. Hurricane Katrina created the closest thing to a clean slate any urban city has seen since the advent of public education. It has not yet been documented in academic research.

This case study on O. Perry Walker High School deals with a number of unique stakeholders. It looks at the effectiveness and impact of using the military to renovate a school building as well as applying the principles of a private sector turnaround company to an institution of public education. It looks at the politics of public education in a unique situation, drawing conclusions that can be extrapolated to fit a variety of other situations.

While the scope of this research is limited to the immediate period between Hurricane Katrina’s landfall on August 29, 2005, and the reopening of O. Perry Walker High School on December 14, 2005, it deals with important issues of ownership and control in public education, offering lessons that can apply around the world. This particular research can also form the base for a longer-term study over the coming years of school reform in one public school-turned-charter.
Chapter 2

New Orleans Public Schools: Power, Control and Quality Public Education

On March 17, 2005\(^2\), as the entire New Orleans Public School district wrapped up a stressful week of the annual high-stakes LEAP test,\(^3\) a student was shot in the leg in a second floor stairwell at O. Perry Walker. This event came to be known as “the incident” among O. Perry Walker teachers. The local newspaper described it as “a neighborhood turf war,” retaliation following a fight two days earlier in which twenty students were arrested. “Thursday’s violence capped a months-long dispute between youths from the Cutoff neighborhood [on the West Bank in Algiers] and others who moved in recent years from Uptown [a neighborhood on the East Bank] to Algiers,” the newspaper report read (Brown & Nelson, 2005).

Several teachers later asserted “the newspapers blew it out of proportion to hurt the reputation of the school.” While the staff and students of O. Perry Walker managed to finish the 2004-2005 school year without any other major violent incidents, the shooting increased media attention as well as political pressures on Walker. Besides the occasional update on arrests made and court proceedings related to the shooting, newspaper reports on the school for the rest of the 2004-2005 school year were unusually positive. They highlighted its talent show, the success of its new robotics team in a regional tournament, the community service efforts of its band, a multicultural quilt produced by the students in the innovative Arts and Public Service Smaller Learning Community class, and a history class focusing on New Orleans culture, particularly its culinary delights.

\(^2\) Appendix A contains a chronology of events relevant to this research for quick reference.
\(^3\) For a more thorough discussion of the Louisiana Education Assessment Program (LEAP), see p. 13.
While the school board focused on increasing security and appeasing parents, incidents like the shooting spurred a small group of community leaders to meet about the future of Algiers schools. A group who loosely dubbed themselves the Algiers Group, led by the elected District Four School Board member Lourdes Moran, consisting mostly of local church leaders, politicians, including the City Council District C Representative Jackie Clarkson and State Representative Jim Tucker, and a few educators, called a community meeting that attracted almost 100 people. This group of “power brokers,” as one informant described them, took this opportunity to begin to outline a future for West Bank schools, a future that was distinct from East Bank schools or the Orleans Parish School Board. Smaller meetings of this group continued on an invitation only basis at the homes of its leaders.

O. Perry Walker High School, however, continued to face difficulties. The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program released 2004-2005 scores showing 83 percent of O. Perry Walker students scored below basic (i.e., below grade level) in English; 76 percent below basic in Math, 88 percent in Science and 81 percent in Social Studies. The school had been listed as “academically unacceptable” from 2002 through 2005, according to the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).

The summer of 2005 brought about personnel and impending structural changes in the administration at the school board level, impacting the system in which O. Perry Walker was embedded. The summer of 2005 marked yet another round of an ongoing series of battles between the Orleans Parish School Board\(^4\) and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the state governing board for public education, based primarily in Baton Rouge.

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\(^4\) “The Orleans Parish School Board,” the official title of the governing body of the non-chartered New Orleans public schools, will be used interchangeably with the more colloquial “New Orleans Public School Board” throughout this study; the borders of Orleans Parish (the county of Orleans) and the City of New Orleans are the same.
The Struggle for Control between the State and Local School Board

The battle over the New Orleans Public Schools had been characterized in several ways. Many saw it as a battle over power and control between the locally elected school board and primarily African American leadership of the schools and the outsiders in Baton Rouge, who are predominately white. The dividing lines are drawn here along several parameters depending upon one’s perspective: black vs. white; poor vs. wealthy; community control vs. business efficiency, professionalism and educational expertise; political vs. apolitical; democratic vs. oligarchic or even autocratic. Regardless of who stands where, every side claims to focus on the “best interests of the children” and “quality education.”

In 1999, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education expanded the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) to include a high-stakes test in fourth, eighth and tenth grades in an attempt to introduce greater accountability for children’s education at the teacher, school and district level. Students who did not score at an “Approaching Basic” level on the test were not promoted to the next grade. Schools that did not show improvement from year-to-year were placed in “corrective action” and threatened with closing. O. Perry Walker was among them.

The New Orleans community responded vocally with surprise and disgust to the implementation of LEAP, even though, by some reports, they were adequately informed. An organization of parents and community leaders called Parents for Educational Justice challenged the case on behalf of 131 parents of public school students in the Fifth District Federal Court, asserting the test unfairly punished students—predominantly poor and African-American—for failures of the educational system. The suit made it to the Supreme Court before ultimately being
rejected in 2002. Meanwhile, the Orleans Parish School Board, along with the New Orleans City Council, sought a reprieve from the State BESE only weeks before the test was scheduled. State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard voiced his disappointment in the protest, saying, “It is certainly not the right thing to do coming from the leadership [of the New Orleans School Board].” (Gray, 2000)

Community frustration with LEAP was a symptom of a larger trend. The New Orleans Public Schools had become increasingly segregated according to race and class. Through a system of magnet and city-wide-access schools, the New Orleans Public Schools could boast of having some of the best performing schools in the state while being the worst performing school system in the state. The crown jewels of the system were a handful of high-performing schools—particularly Benjamin Franklin High School and Robert Mills Lusher Elementary and Middle School Extension—that had a base of middle and upper-class parents, parent-teacher organizations actively fundraising, and selective admissions criteria. Benjamin Franklin High School, located at the University of New Orleans, was the highest performing school in the state from 2001 through 2005. Robert Mills Lusher, an elementary and middle school spread out over two campuses in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans only blocks from Tulane University, was known for its highly selective admissions. Edna Karr Magnet School had become the only magnet school on the city’s West Bank. By 2004, the Louisiana Department of Education recognized it as a school of “exemplary growth,” receiving four out of five stars. Its rating tied Lusher Elementary as second only to Benjamin Franklin High School in Orleans Parish.

Meanwhile, the majority of the other 112 schools, with a larger population of African-American and poor students eligible for free and reduced lunch, continued to languish.

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5 Percent of students eligible for the “free and reduced lunch” program is the most commonly used indicator for poverty in a school or school district.
With the implementation of the high-stakes LEAP tests, schools like Walker faced greater challenges. They created an 8.5 grade for students who did not pass the eighth grade LEAP test. O. Perry Walker also strengthened its summer school component to accommodate more students and altered its teaching to focus more on test preparation. Between 2001 and 2004, the number of O. Perry Walker students the Louisiana Department of Education reported as eligible for the LEAP General Exit Examination (GEE), administered in the spring of tenth grade, had increased by 70 percent, from 364 to 523.

Over the years, even school employees asserted that the entire district had failed students, as evidenced by the poor maintenance of school buildings, political infighting, and financial and operational mismanagement. In addition, the school system struggled with stability at the leadership level and faced declining public trust. The district had been through nine superintendents in the last eleven years. Enrollment had dropped by almost 30,000 students, more than 30 percent, in those eleven years. Trends toward suburbanization, residential segregation and the privatization of education meant a declining investment in the New Orleans Public Schools, primarily by the white middle class.6 Figures 1 and 2 reveal this trend according to basic demographic enrollment data.

As one teacher and community activist noted in the spring of 2005,

The big issue is not the superintendent or the School Board. The real issue is when are we, as citizens, going to be engaged in our schools. The way the schools are structured, there is a whole class of people who don’t send their kids to public schools. Right now, the teachers are the most stable thing we have (Carr, April 21, 2005).

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6 It is interesting to note that this crisis is nothing new. In 1991, Superintendent Everett Williams quoted 1878 Superintendent William O. Rogers, saying, “Here, as elsewhere, public education is in a crisis of its history. With the most rigorous economy, large expenditures are needed.” (Devore & Logsdon, 1991)
By 2005, the Louisiana State Department of Education had labeled 104 of the 117 New Orleans Public Schools as failing, including O. Perry Walker. The state defines a failing school as one “academically unacceptable [according to LEAP as the primary indicator] for four consecutive years.” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006) Of the other 13 public schools, seven were magnet schools. “A magnet school is defined as having academic entrance requirements (e.g., GPA, test scores),” according to the Louisiana Department of Education (2001). Through magnet or citywide access schools, the New Orleans Public Schools had become a two-tiered system. The first class schools were reserved for primarily middle and upper class children, almost the only white children in the entire New Orleans Public School system, through selective admissions and other criteria as well as working with a strong base of well-connected and organized parent-teacher associations.

As shown in Figure 1, from 1989 to 2003, the population of white students in the New Orleans Public Schools had decreased from eight percent to four percent. As shown in Figure 2, in 2003, 47 percent of the 2,815 white students who remained in the system were enrolled in magnet or charter schools (National Center for Education Statistics). The system had increasingly become a system of “haves” and “have-nots,” with the majority of “the haves” opting for more selective public or more expensive parochial or private schools, leaving “the have-nots” behind in a failing public school system with decreasing resources, community support and investment.
Figure 1. Enrollment Data for New Orleans Public Schools, 1989-2003

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Enrollment Black, non-hispanic</th>
<th>Enrollment White, non-hispanic</th>
<th>Percentage of black students in total enrollment</th>
<th>Percentage of white students in total enrollment</th>
<th>Total Enrollment Eligible for free or reduced lunch*</th>
<th>Percentage of total enrollment eligible for free or reduced lunch*</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Data before 1997 only includes free-lunch eligibility. Beginning in 1998, data includes both free and reduced lunch eligibility.

One teacher, who has taught at O. Perry Walker from 1973 through 2006, described this decline at his school:

Our kids used to come from the Navy base and a lot of them had parents who worked in the petrochemical industry. They were middle and upper class. That changed with the oil bust in the 1980s. Then the district started doing magnet schools. I think it was around 1987. They skimmed the cream off of the top at Walker. The high performing children went to Ben Franklin [High School] and [Edna] Karr leaving us with what was left. When Karr became a magnet school, it really hurt Walker.

In the summer of 2004, four members of the Orleans Parish School Board were allegedly involved in a conspiracy to terminate New Orleans School Superintendent Anthony Amato, a reformer who enjoyed widespread support, particularly from the State Legislature and BESE Board. The effort was led by two board members, one of whom represented District Four, Ellenese Brooks-Simms, former School Board president and O. Perry Walker’s representative on the board, who had become an outspoken critic of Dr. Amato. With the impending election of a new school board that fall, the attempt to terminate Dr. Amato was seen as a power play to undermine the State Legislature’s takeover plans. The New Orleans School Board was concerned about a bill introduced in the State Legislature in May—Act 193, which stripped the School Board of some of its powers and granted the Superintendent greater authority in turning the district around (Webster, 2005). Amato and his supporters denied involvement with writing the bill. The bill, according to the business leadership group credited with writing it, known as the Committee for a Better New Orleans, sought to stabilize district leadership in the Superintendent and prevent the School Board from “micro-managing.” (Archer, July 14, 2004) One of the business committee members who was a strong proponent of the bill was Brian Riedlinger of the
School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans. He was later tapped to serve as the first Director of the newly created Algiers Charter School Association.

Two days after Act 193 was introduced in the State House of Representatives, the School Board called an emergency meeting allegedly to fire Superintendent Amato on a day that he was scheduled to be out of town. Two school board members, who opposed the firing of Amato, then pushed successfully for a restraining order in federal court. The court battle that ensued about the powers of the School Board was reminiscent of the court battles over desegregation of New Orleans schools in the early 1960s. U.S. District Court Judge G. Thomas Porteous ruled that the board was required to give Dr. Amato a hearing and proper notice. The judge cited the Supreme Court’s landmark civil rights ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, arguing that firing Amato would cause “further disruptions in the school system” and violate students’ rights. The incident had racial undertones. The two school board members who sought the support of the federal courts were the only two white members of the board, seeking to support a White Hispanic Superintendent, on a majority African-American school board.

The State Legislature passed Act 193 and Governor Kathleen Blanco signed it into law on June 10, 2004, foretelling a period of increased involvement in New Orleans schools on the part of the State Legislature. Even as a newly elected local School Board took office in January of 2005, the struggle for control over the schools between the state and local school board continued, with the threat of state takeover always looming on the horizon. The underlying racial dynamics of this struggle would continue to grow, even though their overt appearance in the public discourse was rare. The January elections left an African-American minority on the Orleans Parish School Board.
Figure 2. Enrollment of Black and White students in Magnet and Charter Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Enrollment Black, non-hispanic</th>
<th>Total Enrollment White, non-hispanic</th>
<th>Enrollment of White, non-hispanic students in magnet schools</th>
<th>Enrollment of White, non-hispanic students in charter schools</th>
<th>Enrollment of White, non-hispanic students in magnet and charter schools combined</th>
<th>Percentage of White students enrolled in magnet or charter schools</th>
<th>Enrollment of Black, non-hispanic students in magnet schools</th>
<th>Enrollment of Black, non-hispanic students in charter schools</th>
<th>Enrollment of Black, non-hispanic students in magnet and charter schools combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>75,383</td>
<td>3,875</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4,180</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>4,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>74,305</td>
<td>3,440</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4,170</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>4,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>71,968</td>
<td>3,060</td>
<td>1,093</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1,117</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>5,985</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>6,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>68,051</td>
<td>2,753</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>5,993</td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>65,598</td>
<td>2,466</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>1,252</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>3,888</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>5,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>64,498</td>
<td>2,301</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>1,336</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>3,886</td>
<td>1,614</td>
<td>5,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shortly before the new school board took office in January, a federal grand jury indicted eleven people—teachers, secretaries, and representatives of an insurance company that did business with the school system—for corruption, including kickbacks, forged time sheets and paychecks (Archer, January 5, 2005). By April 2005, reports circulated that the district was broke. One newspaper report cited the state Legislative Auditor, who reported that a school administrator “rushed to City Hall on April 1 to pick up a check for millions of dollars in tax revenue and hand-delivered it to the bank, minutes before the deposit deadline. If that check would have been late, thousands of payroll checks would have bounced.” (Thevenot, April 13, 2005) While the teachers at O. Perry Walker, like so many other schools throughout the district, had grown accustomed to late and inaccurate paychecks, they had never had trouble cashing them. The day after a heated April 11, 2005, New Orleans School Board meeting in which one of the members of the State Legislature who had authored Act 193 publicly encouraged the board to fire Amato, the superintendent resigned.

The local school board then moved quickly into the breach. The board appointed Deputy Superintendent Ora Watson as Acting Superintendent after a brief public show of division over the choice. That same month, forced with a choice between a state takeover of the district’s finances or hiring an outside firm, the New Orleans Public School Board approved a $1.5 million ninety-day contract with Deloitte Consulting. Before April was over, the State BESE had taken over four schools it deemed failing, the mayor had publicly predicted the demise of the school board, a high school student had been paralyzed by a gunshot on school grounds, and the New Orleans School Board had begun the process of looking at a smaller budget for 2005-2006, which included closing several schools. The only mention of O. Perry Walker in the potential closings was that it would be the site of one of the community public hearings on the new plans.
In addition, the New Orleans School Board approved a more than six million dollar two-year contract to begin in July with Alvarez and Marsal, a New York-based turnaround firm that boasted of success in restructuring the St. Louis school district. Alvarez and Marsal was expected to pick up where Deloitte Consulting would leave off, addressing all management and operations issues “on the non-academic side”, including operations, human resources, information technology, and finance. The firm was chosen by State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard, whose authority rests in part on the state’s responsibility for funneling tens of millions of dollars of federal money to the Orleans Parish School Board.

One member of Alvarez and Marsal says they had had conversations with the Orleans Parish School Board 18 months earlier to see if the district was interested in their services. This time they were contacted by BESE, in response to federal and state pressure, when the Orleans Parish School Board “could not provide clear documentation trails leading to where 71-plus million dollars of Title I and Title IV grant monies had been spent.” The Alvarez and Marsal leader recounts the ultimatum presented to the school board by State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard: “You either put somebody in to help you clean this up or we take your funds away.” When the Orleans Parish School Board requested permission to improve accounting and operations in-house, they were denied. Resigned to “being handcuffed,” as the turnaround company leader describes it, the school board hired Alvarez and Marsal. The private firm would be paid with Orleans Parish School Board dollars and report to an oversight committee of the Louisiana State Superintendent for Education. Following the vote, the Orleans Parish School Board president resorted again to the courts, filing an unsuccessful lawsuit that challenged the board’s own hiring of Alvarez and Marsal.
Beginning in late June, Alvarez and Marsal brought in a Chief Restructuring Officer who reports directly to the Orleans Parish School Board and a team of 28 people, as they describe, “to bring the accountability into the system, to bring the financial controls, to get the communication of the systems.”

As a leader of Alvarez and Marsal involved early on in their work with New Orleans schools explained:

> We came in—Alvarez and Marsal—and started digging deep, started looking at the financial situation—the finances and the accounting department. We started tearing each and every department upside down. And we brought in 28 people. It’s questionable even if that was enough. The 28 people basically were divided in the areas of finance, in operations, IT and HR. And in HR, it included payroll because that was a mess. We were brought in approximately eight weeks before the hurricane hit and we were making inroads. We had already done what you would call a RIF—Reduction in Force. And that had occurred approximately a week before the hurricane.

According to Alvarez and Marsal, they went on to find a chain of surprises beginning with a budget “that even the budget director who put the budget together said was a bogus budget.” The turnaround firm leader continued:

> The IT department was totally broken. The systems aren’t talking to each other. You go into the district and you find that they are creating budgets off of Excel, not with the program that they have, that they purchased and spent a million plus dollars on: Oracle…. As an example, we started investigating what was going on in IT and found various modules of Oracle had not only [not] been implemented, they haven’t been installed. These were modules that all we kept hearing from the budget department is, “Oh I sure could use the budget module.” And then from HR: “I sure could use the personnel module.” And it’s there. Everything is there…. And they didn’t do it. Why? Well, we find out that the school district is notorious for hiring a lot of friends and people to do work that maybe aren’t
qualified. They didn’t have a qualified Oracle person. Oracle’s not an easy program…. You had to have somebody there that understood it and worked with the program. And they didn’t. So in the meantime, they purchased [it], they only have part of [it] installed, but it’s not operating. And it’s not just not operating because of not having it installed, but the people are not experienced to use it. In the finance department, there’s not one accountant, not one CPA, or even a person with just an accounting degree…. When you don’t have a system that works, hopefully you’ve got people behind you or people that understand accounting and the processes. If you don’t, then what do you have? And that’s exactly what the state came in and said, “Holy smokes…where did all this money go? And we couldn’t track it.”

Leaders at Alvarez and Marsal compared the financial mismanagement of the New Orleans Public Schools with that of major corporate scandals:

I’ve met colleagues who have worked with Health South; we’ve liquidated Arthur Andersen. We’ve run as a Chief Restructuring Officer, had to downsize big, big corporations, billion dollars plus. The guy who was involved with Health South with three-plus billion-dollar fraud is the interim CFO right now for us in New Orleans school district. He said he’s never seen anything like this. It’s fraud or corruption or the systems are so broken…. Where do we start? And that’s the hair-raising problem.

Alvarez and Marsal were by no means the only ones disgusted with the system. The New Orleans Public Schools were on the agenda again for the summer legislative session in Baton Rouge. The largest district in the largest city in the state again ranked as the lowest performing district in the state, according to the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program. While Walker was in the middle of the pack among New Orleans district high schools, it ranked in the bottom five percent in the state. For the third year in a row, a proposal to offer vouchers to New Orleans Public School students to opt out of the public system in favor of private schools on the taxpayers’ dime made it to the floor of the House. Despite objections from the New Orleans
legislative delegation, the state House of Representatives passed the bill, approving 1,400 vouchers for New Orleans public school students to attend schools of their choice with taxpayer dollars. The plan was narrowly defeated in the Senate. O. Perry Walker students that couldn’t move, pay or test their way into another school would be returning to their school in August. The voucher plan, however, had garnered more support than ever before. Citing the memory of late State Senate Chair John Hainkel, who died on the floor of the Senate less than a month earlier, one senator introduced a bill to allow the Louisiana governor to appoint somebody to temporarily take control of the entire system.

One state senator remarked in the local newspaper:

Orleans is at the bottom of the barrel, and it brings down the entire state. Businesses continue to leave the city, and anybody with the wherewithal has left the public school system because they have no confidence in it anymore (Ritea, June 13, 2005).

In the same article, another state senator reflected the growing frustration with and opposition to the New Orleans School Board, seeing no difference between the newly elected reformers and the old guard. He said, “I’m prepared to vote for almost anything we can do to erode the political establishment that has created this mess and allows it to endure.” By July, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin joined the chorus, calling “the current system…beyond repair. I say they declare bankruptcy and turn it over to a federal judge. Then let’s go fix it.” (Carr, July 14, 2005)

A Culture of Insecurity: O. Perry Walker Opens for 2005-2006 School Year

As the heat of August blanketed New Orleans, marking the final weeks of a markedly violent summer, the staff of the mayor’s alma mater, O. Perry Walker High School, geared up for
a new school year. The leadership made it a point that this year would be different. “We are trying to start a new culture around here,” the principal commented (Nelson & Schindler, 2005). They wanted the “incident” to be part of the distant past. Teachers and students gathered together before school started to spruce up the building, painting the lockers and hallways. The majority of O. Perry Walker teachers, like countless others throughout the New Orleans Public Schools, had a reputation for doing what they could within the confines of severely limited resources. They taught computer classes without working computers while brand new computers sat unused in other schools. Many did not have textbooks. The ones they had were often outdated; and there were not enough copies for each student in often overcrowded classes. Copy machines frequently did not work. And many teachers bought classroom supplies out of their own pocket.

The challenges remained in August 2005. Several teachers still did not have classrooms or teaching assignments. The restrooms still did not function, nor did the rows of lockers in the hallway. In the last ten years, the great majority of lockers throughout New Orleans Public Schools had been sealed shut, painted over and locked—for security purposes. Similarly, many of the schools’ exit doors were locked shut with heavy chains and padlocks. In defiance of fire codes prohibiting the locks, school administrators throughout the district explained they needed to manage entrances and exits to keep the schools safe. Although most schools had at least one security officer, principals complained that they lacked the staff to patrol the hallways, lockers and exits—to keep them all functioning.

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7 There had been 182 murders in New Orleans for the year, compared with 167 at that time the year before (Philbin, 2005).
The growing security concerns in New Orleans schools were no different at Walker High School. After the “incident” in March, there was greater pressure on the school to get the 2005-2006 year off to the right start. While the number of New Orleans Public Schools security officers had tripled immediately after the shooting in March, the school was back to a minimal security force to police the 1,400-student campus. The principal made no bones about his intention to refuse entry to any students in any way connected to the March incident, particularly students from New Orleans’ East Bank who might precipitate a turf rivalry in this West Bank high school.

Teachers explained that the “right start” meant as few fights as possible. In the weeks before school opened, according to one teacher, the buzz among the staff was all about the new security cameras. “They were hidden so there wouldn’t be as many problems in places like the stairwells.” The teacher notes the excitement over these new security measures was one of the main things that distinguished the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year from past years. One rookie teacher describes her work to prepare her classroom, review the textbooks and classroom procedures while veteran teachers offered “strategies to survive,” including what to do when a fight breaks out in the classroom. If all else failed, one veteran teacher reassured the rookie, “I got [sic] your back.”

Students returned to school on Wednesday, August 17, 2005. Teachers reported that things went off without a hitch in late August at O. Perry Walker. “Before the hurricane, there was only one fight that I know of. Things were running smoothly. Students were OK with their schedules. There were fewer students than expected,” said one teacher.
Hurricane Katrina and the California National Guard

On Friday, August 26, 2006, O. Perry Walker High School let out as usual at 3 p.m. Some classrooms still had the day’s lesson on the boards. Teachers and students left their belongings in the classroom, planning on returning Monday. The students and staff looked forward to the weekend, many still unaware of Katrina, the hurricane that had formed in the Gulf of Mexico. At the height of the annual hurricane season in the Gulf South region, others were aware of the approaching storm, but went about business as usual.

Throughout Friday evening and Saturday, the local news stations issued reports more and more frequently on the status of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the status of local institutions that shaped people’s lives. Tulane University, the largest university and largest private employer in the city, announced it was closing during the welcoming President’s Convocation. The university president encouraged the more than 1,600 first-year students and their families, as well as the staff and upper class students assisting them with moving into their residence halls, to evacuate the city. The university evacuation plan was fully implemented by Saturday evening, which coincided with the first day of freshmen orientation. The university announced it was closed until Wednesday. Other businesses and private educational institutions followed similar scenarios.

By the end of Saturday, the Orleans Parish School Board had announced the closure of all schools through Tuesday, according to one teacher. As the path of Hurricane Katrina gradually bent closer and closer to New Orleans, institutions closed, advising staff and clients to evacuate through at least the middle of the week.

Finally, in the early morning hours of Sunday, August 28, 2005, Mayor C. Ray Nagin issued a mandatory evacuation of the City of New Orleans. For those who could not evacuate, the Regional Transit Authority, New Orleans’ public transit system, would send buses to deliver
residents to the Louisiana Superdome, the football arena in the Central Business District that had been used as a storm shelter for years. Buses began picking Algiers residents up at O. Perry Walker High School at noon on Sunday. While many city residents did not have the ability to evacuate, the majority took Mayor Nagin’s directive to heart. But approximately 100,000 residents remained in the city for the Category Four hurricane as it made landfall overnight Sunday and into Monday, August 29, 2005.

While New Orleans residents who had evacuated began to get news reports that their city had been spared the full wrath of a Category Four or Five hurricane, the East Bank of the city began filling up with water. The levee system designed to protect the city from flooding, failed, suffering four major breaches and numerous minor compromises. By Wednesday, August 31, 2005, 80 percent of the city had flooded. In some parts of the city, the water rose more than 10 feet, sending residents who stayed to their rooftops in temperatures reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit, to await rescue.

Meanwhile, approximately 80 percent of the 125 New Orleans Public School buildings were also under water, according to district officials. Many schools became places of refuge for neighborhood residents as the water came up. Compounding the damage caused by flood and wind was the damage caused by human habitation, living without flushing toilets or running water for days. Many of the schools in flooded neighborhoods offered a second floor, propelling neighborhood residents—and in some reports, city and military authorities—to break in and use them as informal shelters.

As the entire nation wrestled with the disaster, the city’s schools were closed indefinitely. The teachers, staff and students of O. Perry Walker were scattered around the country. The building remained empty, but on dry ground, throughout the storm and its aftermath.
The Alvarez and Marsal staff, almost entirely white and middle class, who hailed from around the United States, began to regroup within a week of the storm, using the School for the Deaf in Baton Rouge. The school’s dormitories were converted into a temporary shelter. A week after Hurricane Katrina, under escort, Alvarez and Marsal staff commuted daily between Baton Rouge and New Orleans to begin to assess the schools. For the firm’s staff, this was their first time visiting the majority of the Orleans Parish Schools. One of the organization’s leaders involved in the assessment explained:

The first week after the disaster it was determined that probably the only schools that we would be able to open were on the West Bank, simply because it didn’t flood. I went to the West Bank and assessed all the schools. I [found] these are not in good condition—but it is not because of the hurricane. There are some things due to the hurricane: roofing damage and water coming in. But damn, these things look like a war zone. That’s because of maintenance issues. This is gonna be a lot of work.

Alvarez and Marsal staff began to assess the East Bank schools in more depth a week later, primarily those in the Garden District and Uptown, both areas in more middle class neighborhoods that had received minimal flooding. Two weeks after the hurricane, the Alvarez and Marsal team had assessed 21 schools. “And then we focused on those 21,” the lead facilities person explained. O. Perry Walker High School, one of three Orleans Parish high schools on the West Bank, was among them. The auditorium and gymnasium had roof damage from the hurricane, but the teaching and administrative spaces had only minimal damage.

The Council of Great City Schools, a Washington D.C. based coalition that represented 66 of the nation’s largest urban public school systems, sent engineers from big city school districts—in New York City, Miami-Dade County, Las Vegas, San Diego and Albuquerque—to assist after the storm. Alvarez and Marsal staff, joined by this team of engineers and Federal
Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) assessors, did a more thorough examination over the next two weeks. The leader of the effort explained:

We took pictures. We did assessments and said, “Okay. Now we know how bad we are so we can quickly get on the gun.” Okay. Any normal school system has a disaster recovery plan so you’ve got people in place, no matter what, when something like this happens. We didn’t have it. So opening up schools wasn’t going to be that easy. We didn’t have anything in place. Our biggest problem was that we didn’t have keys to get into the schools. So we had to break into a few. Others were wide open because the hurricane blew open the doors. But imagine not having keys to get into a school and every classroom door is locked. So trying to assess was almost impossible. We’d look through the little windows. We found some of the principals, who sent us the keys, but very few. And that’s how we went, from building to building, checking the worst part, checking the roofs, because you can easily assess a building by looking at the roof. If the outside of it didn’t look like there’d been much damage, it was just the water, how far did the water go up?

Alvarez and Marsal staff, in coordination with the Orleans Parish School Board and Superintendent, set November 1, 2005, as a projected date to reopen the schools that received minimal damage. O. Perry Walker High School was on that list. Acting Superintendent Ora Watson invited Mary Laurie, a principal known for turning around the culture of difficult schools, to take the position. She had earned the reputation by turning around Carter G. Woodson Middle School over the last four years following a shooting in September 2000, on school grounds that put two students in jail and two in the hospital (Pompilio, 2000). Mrs. Laurie outlined her thinking in a March 2006, interview:

My vision for Walker is the same vision I have for everywhere I go. Always and forever in my definition of quality experiences for young folk, I will remember the mission statement for Woodson: “A place where children can dream, discoveries can be made, and learning can be fun.” There is a little girl I want
everyone leaving Walker to feel like. Mr. McGee, our music teacher, picks up his little daughter—I think she is about three—from pre-school every day. And every evening I say to her, “How was school?” And she says, “Fun!” Boy, just think of the power if somebody would say to high school students, “How was school?” And they’d say, “Fun.” Because captured in that one word are all of the processes that need to be in place so that a child can be successful. Fun. With fun comes a whole lot of good learning. That is my vision. Fun. You’ve got dreams. Our children don’t dream. They don’t dream any more. I remember Big T, our athletic director. When we first started up, he was holding a gym class, and he was talking about the kids from L.B. Landry and they were talking about going to this university. And here is Walker right around the corner, but the students who were pre-Katrina Walker students would just shrug. You see the kids coming in here [to the school office] and getting those ACT tests. And one student who said, “I am gonna give this a try. I don’t know if I am going to do all right on it.” But at least he was willing to give it a try. That should just be a natural part of any high school—getting the kids to go try out for something, be part of something. Be in a club. Be on a team. Be part of something. Make your memories. That’s what I tell [the students] all the time. There is a time and place for everything and you only get high school one time. That doesn’t mean that you can’t work later on, if you drop out, towards a degree. But it will never be this time. You’re never going to be 14, 15, 16, 17, ever again. And use this to make those memories that only this time and place can make for you.

Which schools would reopen was initially a facilities decision, left, in large part, to be determined by the Alvarez and Marsal staff member who had inspected the schools. Like many institutions after Hurricane Katrina, the planning was initially random, shaped by political pressures, geography and available resources. The staff member explained:

I was told I’ve got to get the schools up and running by November 1. Now come back and tell us how you’re going to do it. I had another couple of team members who were going to send off the RFPs [Request for Proposals] and get the contractors. But in the meantime, what can I do to get the ball rolling and moving
And what I did was start to engage the politicians, engage various community members, engage the military—the National Guard—and ask for help. At the same time, because everything was over in Algiers, the City Council member there was having the military call us, asking, “When are you going to open up my schools?” The military is calling on her behalf! Everybody wants their school fixed and we were getting pulled in all directions. But do we have the population? That would be the next question. Will we have the population? Which are the right schools to fix? The decision was that the West Bank would open with open enrollment. Kids from all over the city would be bussed. What we said was that we’d have schools ready to open. Are they all in perfect shape? Absolutely not. There’s a lot of work to be done that has to do with negligence and maintenance. So I got the [National] Guard, the Firemen’s Task Force and the Peace Corps to come in and help, help us paint, help us clean up the facility, remove the debris, load it up on the street so it could be picked up. Let’s mow the grass because it is so high. I know that many people were saying to me, why do you want to cut the grass? Cut the grass and it tells the community we’re starting up. We’re moving forward, looking cleaner. We’re serious. We’re focusing on education. We’re going to get this school up and going. Give them hope. They needed hope. And that’s what we did. And one thing led to another. Perry Walker was the first school. My goal was that, no matter what, by November 1, I was going to have two schools open: a high school and an elementary school. At worse, I might not have a lot of enrollment, but I’d have two schools I can put children in. So I went to O. Perry Walker because it was closer to the community where I was. I’m on the West Bank in Algiers Point. Also I chose that school because it had the least amount of damage, other than the roof. If I’m going to get the school up and going, my idea is that it’s two schools and the ones that are easiest to fix.

As floodwaters were pumped out of the city, public works and infrastructure restored, the pressure to reopen schools increased. As the fall of 2005 progressed, environmental safety concerns gave way to concerns over the lack of housing and schools as the major barriers to
people returning to the city. The public discourse about the future of New Orleans Public Schools was one of opportunity amidst disaster. For Alvarez and Marsal, it was the opportunity to rebuild from scratch, which several leaders described as easier than repairing a broken system. “Maybe this is a blessing in disguise because we can start fresh,” one Alvarez and Marsal leader commented in December.

Alvarez and Marsal, in coordination with the City Council District C Representative Jackie Clarkson, brought in the California National Guard to clean up the school. Mrs. Clarkson had made several public appearances claiming that her unflooded district would lead the city’s rebirth under the mantra: “Algiers will bring back New Orleans.” While Mrs. Clarkson, who was planning a bid for an At-Large seat on the City Council in the upcoming elections, bickered with Alvarez and Marsal and the Orleans Parish School Board behind the scenes about taking credit for their work, the California National Guard spent more than four weeks occupying the school by day. The company of approximately 30 men, whose careers in civilian life range from electrician to building inspector, cut the grass, painted murals, repaired and stained broken benches, fixed windows and doors, stripped and waxed floors, and cleaned out and organized storage areas and classrooms at O. Perry Walker. They removed seven construction dumpsters worth of trash.

Their presence at the school drew controversy. The outspoken sergeant of the unit that had recently served in the war in Iraq said the school was worse than anything he or his men saw in Iraq. “I didn’t think kids were going here, based on the condition of the school,” he commented, adding, “As a parent, there is no way in hell I would send a child to this school.” He publicly chided the school administration and teachers for allowing the school to deteriorate to the condition in which he found it. He urged that every staff member at the school should be
fired immediately. A local newspaper reported that the National Guard found used condoms and multiple empty liquor bottles in the custodial closet and a receipt for $2,200 for cabinets the woodworking teacher had allegedly used school facilities to produce for his own profit (Ritea, October 22, 2005).

Meanwhile, as they began to develop a sense of ownership in the project, the armed and uniformed National Guard managed security at the building. O. Perry Walker teachers reported not being able to get into the building. One teacher, who took a temporary teaching job in a nearby rural community, returned to Walker to reclaim personal belongings and teaching materials from her classroom, said that a guardsman at the entrance grilled me. He said, “You worked in this place? Didn’t you feel scared? Didn’t you feel horrible about the conditions?” He made me show ID and compared it to the diploma I had left in my classroom. He made me promise not to tell anybody I was allowed in.

The teacher went on to explain that she was encouraged to say how much better the school looked as a result of the National Guard’s presence. “It looked the same to me except for the murals and the presence of a lot of National Guard people,” the teacher said in a March interview. Several teachers reported that the California National Guard took credit for work the teachers had done in August. Undoubtedly, veteran teachers felt that the October article on the California National Guard’s work at O. Perry Walker High School was another example of “the newspapers [blowing something] out of proportion to hurt the reputation of the school.” In fact, the former principal, Ronald Ayler, wrote a letter to the editor countering the National Guard’s assault on the O. Perry Walker staff (Ayler, 2005).

“By the time we were done, we owned that school,” commented the National Guard Sergeant in his hometown newspaper after returning from the mission. “The mission affected me
more, emotionally, than my whole trip to Iraq — as a parent, as a citizen of the United States, as a taxpayer, and as a soldier and a guardsman. I’ll never go back to New Orleans, or Louisiana. Not unless I have to.” (Brownfield, 2005)

O. Perry Walker Charter School

The National Guardsmen, however, were not the only ones working on the future of Walker. In October, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin kicked off the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission Education Committee, which would spend three months developing a plan for public education in New Orleans. The extent of power, authority and influence of the Commission was not clear. It was chaired by Scott Cowen, President of Tulane University, the institution that had now replaced the New Orleans Public Schools as the largest employer in New Orleans. He confessed privately that his only experience with public education was as an elementary school student. He would rely on input from stakeholders and experts alike, as well as a committee of 18 members and 27 advisory committee members. The Committee produced ten broad recommendations on how to develop a model education system in New Orleans. The Education Committee saw it as “the opportunity to build a new world class, truly inclusive public school system.” The final report, released in January, would be void of any real implementation strategy (Bring New Orleans Back Commission Education Committee, 2006).

While the Bring New Orleans Back Commission Education Committee was first beginning to gear up, the group of Algiers church leaders and politicians reconvened, meeting with local school principals on October 1. At the home of Jim Tucker, a State Representative for the Algiers region, they talked concretely about the future of West Bank schools in light of the
The California National Guard spent several weeks at O. Perry Walker High School. (Left)

Two members of the California National Guard spray paint an exterior wall in October 2005 at O. Perry Walker High School while a supervisor looks on. (Right)

A California National Guardsman repaints an eave in an exterior corridor at O. Perry Walker High School. (Left)

California National Guardsmen paint over graffiti in an exterior corridor at O. Perry Walker High School. (Right)

All photographs provided by Alvarez and Marsal.
recent disaster. While they discussed the possibility of writing a charter to run the schools, nothing was written at the meeting.

At the next school board meeting, the morning of October 7, 2005, Acting Superintendent Dr. Ora Watson presented a plan to reopen schools, including O. Perry Walker and several other West Bank schools, as early as November 14, 2005. Having heard Dr. Watson’s presentation, most community members and school board watchdogs, including Brenda Mitchell, president of the Teacher’s Union, left the board meeting. To Dr. Watson’s surprise, Jim Tucker along with members of his group presented an application, dated October 7, to charter the Algiers schools. According to one account, the application had been e-mailed to Dr. Watson and the board 24 hours before the meeting. The application was written by the District Four School Board representative and Orleans Parish School Board Vice President Lourdes Moran, who had convened the Algiers group. It was part of a series of last-minute political maneuverings.

On October 7, 2005, the same day as the meeting, Governor Kathleen Blanco, a former public school teacher herself, signed an Executive Order waiving requirements of the state charter school law, including the requirement that the conversion of a public school to a charter school be approved by a school’s faculty and parents. In her address to the State Legislature three weeks earlier, she promised, “We’re not going to simply re-create the schools of New Orleans the way they were. [It will be] an historic effort to build a world-class, quality system of public education in New Orleans.” (Robelen, 2005) She saw this as a key first step.

The charter item was not on the School Board’s October 7 agenda, which the board is required by law to make public at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting. The charter application, despite being thin and lacking many details, was approved by the School Board four to two with one abstention. Public uproar followed. The words of one community activist reflect
the anger over the lack of public engagement in the process: “There is something sinister when we trespass on those we intend to serve in the name of betterment. There is something foul here.” (WWL-TV, 2005)

For a district that was becoming increasingly divided between “the haves” and “the have-nots,” this felt to many, in colloquial terms, like “kicking” the poorest people of New Orleans “when they were already down.” Only five weeks earlier, the suffering on the faces of the poor African-American community of New Orleans—which had become more and more the faces of the families currently served by the New Orleans public school system—were broadcast around the world as they were left behind in the flood. Losing their schools would be another painful blow. To many activists, charter schools seemed to be the latest way for elite white middle and upper class interests to grab control of the New Orleans Public Schools in the wake of the disaster. While they were assured that a spot in the charter schools would be available for any child from anywhere in the city, access to transportation, parental literacy levels, student test performance, activity fees, the ability for families to provide all necessary documentation and enroll in-person, as well as perform mandatory parent volunteer hours or attend conferences had excluded poor African-American students in the past. A local minister, allegedly in cahoots with the current School Board president, who voted against the charters, filed an injunction, citing the lack of public notice.

Within a week, Civil District Court Judge Nadine M. Ramsey granted a restraining order to halt the process for two weeks. The judge’s writing on the case reflected the sentiments of many in the community:

[The October 7, 2005 charter decision was] a disguised back-door attempt to push through a pre-hurricane agenda while the citizens of this city are displaced throughout the country. It is in this time of crisis, when the citizens of Orleans
Parish are concerned about the very future of their communities, that the role of public input is critical. The people of New Orleans are entitled to participate in the process that will ultimately change the landscape of the public educational system (Gewertz, October 26, 2005).

During this time, O. Perry Walker and several other West Bank schools were part of two competing plans. Whether O. Perry Walker would open as an Orleans Parish School or an Algiers Charter School was now the decision of another judge in the Civil District Court. Superintendent Watson and a faction of the board continued to work to prepare O. Perry Walker and three other West Bank schools to reopen under the New Orleans Public Schools, should the Civil District judge rule in their favor. Meanwhile, the Algiers charter schools group completed its Articles of Incorporation and applied for official status as the Algiers Charter School Association. That organizational status was granted by Secretary of State Al Ater on October 17, 2005. The already-appointed O. Perry Walker principal, the media, as well as the students and parents anxious to return and enroll their children in school, awaited the outcome. For the time being, the reopening date for the school was still uncertain.

The majority on the Orleans Parish School Board defended their choice, arguing that the approval of the charters was a financial necessity, if schools were to open. According to Alvarez and Marsal officials, the district was in a financial hole. The day of the storm they had planned on borrowing $50 million for operating cash. That had not happened. The State of Louisiana, however, had recently become eligible for a $20.9 million federal grant specifically for opening new charter schools. School board officials justified the decision: the New Orleans Public Schools were in a financial crisis; schools had to be opened. Charter schools meant approximately $2,000 additional funding per pupil, which would provide half of the budget for the newly created Algiers Charter School Association.
On October 27, 2005, Civil District Court Judge Lloyd Medley ruled that the school board would have to revote on any action regarding charter schools once it properly posted the required 24-hour public notice of the meeting and agenda items. That process was already underway for a vote at the October 28, 2005, school board meeting.

At its October 28 meeting, in response to pressure from both the public and the board president, who led the opposition on the board to charter schools, the Orleans Parish School Board passed a resolution requiring each charter school to have at least 25 percent of its students on free or reduced lunch, 10 percent with special needs, and an undetermined percentage of neighborhood children.

The public comment period at that meeting lasted more than two hours. Jackie Clarkson spoke in favor of the Algiers charter schools. While numerous outspoken African-American community activists shouted at the school board for “giving the schools away,” one African-American minister, dressed in his Sunday best, debated with Councilwoman Clarkson along the side wall of the standing-room-only City Council Chambers. “With all due respect, Ms. Clarkson, I think it [approving the charters] is wrong. I am not opposed to charter schools, just the process.” Despite public protest, the Orleans Parish School Board went on to unanimously approve the proposed Algiers charter schools, which included O. Perry Walker High School and twelve other schools, as well as charters for seven East Bank schools. The chambers nearly emptied after the vote as the board moved on to other business.

The Algiers Charter School Association (ACSA) hosted its first public meeting on November 4, 2005. Despite the fact it was during working hours—a Friday morning—close to 100 people attended. The initial ACSA Board was the Orleans Parish School Board. Their first order of business, however, was to read the resignation of Orleans Parish School Board President
Torin Sanders from the Algiers Charter School Association Board. While the Reverend Sanders cited other commitments as the reason, his resignation was not a surprise, considering his opposition to the proposal from the outset. The Algiers Charter School Association Board quickly approved the hiring of Brian Riedlinger of the School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans as director with a salary of $45,000 and Alvarez and Marsal as interim non-academic manager on a $1.3 million contract, each for five months. With a Ph.D. in Educational Administration, a record of success as a former New Orleans Public School principal, and a well-respected record in the business community, Brian Riedlinger had served as president and CEO of the School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans. As a member of the Committee for a Better New Orleans Education Committee and co-author of Act 193 legislation passed eighteen months earlier, he represented the local expertise in school leadership. The charter school board also approved a 2005-2006 operating budget.

While the ACSA Board approved by-laws and handled other organizational matters, including electing the author of the charter application, Lourdes Moran, board president and setting a plan for every Orleans Parish School Board member to rotate off the Algiers board in the five months to come, ACSA staff feverishly worked to get schools staffed and opened. The small ACSA staff went to work choosing five principals and three assistant principals from a pool of 30 applicants for the five schools it would initially open. The majority were former New Orleans Public Schools principals who faced a progressively more uncertain future day by day. Dr. Watson had offered Mary Laurie the principal position at Warren Easton High School—another magnet school that although primarily African-American, was known for high performance and selective admission. But Easton did not yet have a scheduled opening date. So Mary Laurie interviewed with ACSA and was again named principal of O. Perry Walker High
School. This time, though, she was principal of O. Perry Walker Charter High School. She was paired with Brian Gibson, a physically imposing but mild-mannered African-American who had formerly served as principal of a K-8 school in the New Orleans Public School system.

With the exception of one other public school scheduled to open on November 28—Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, a former magnet school Uptown that was now designated for open enrollment—8 the Algiers Charter School Association enjoyed being the biggest game in town. This was a comparative advantage in a splintering public school system that was in the midst of a conversion from one large monopoly to a number of competitive small enterprises. With as many as 12,000 displaced employees and no union obligations, the Algiers Charter School Association leadership could handpick its staff.

The principal reveals her educational philosophy in speaking about her choice between the magnet school and the new charter school:

I was also offered the opportunity to take another [New Orleans Public] school as principal. And initially, I said yes. This was in the interim between my appointment by NOPS [New Orleans Public Schools] and before I was hired [on with ACSA]. It was Warren Easton, which was my alma mater. I remember having a conversation and saying, “Will I have the autonomy, too?” and being told, “Oh no. You’ve got to go by seniority.” And I always say readily to anybody, I am a union person. Last contract, I walked that line. I strongly believe that certain groups in our country wouldn’t be where they are—and I am talking about minority groups, African-Americans, Hispanic, and so on, females, if it was not for unions. I also believe that over time, in respect to the union in NOPS, we built in some processes that were hindrances as opposed to possible solutions in respect to the needs of children. You need to understand, when we open up this

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8 “Open enrollment” became an often-used term in dialogue about New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina. It refers to the fact that a school has as its only selection criteria that children currently or previously (before Hurricane Katrina) reside in Orleans Parish.
school [Easton], it is not going to be the same population. It might have the same name, but it is going to be a different population. And that means we need the flexibility to bring in some folk who I felt were accustomed to dealing with students from various populations. It is part of building a culture that celebrates success and my feeling going in was that you need a variety of people with different experiences to make this work. And so when they said no, I said this is not going to be a good place for me. And I guess I am saying all that to say, that’s why [I chose] Walker. I could not be happy. I didn’t want to go into Easton with a staff that was going to deal with the same population. First of all, that would not energize me. I am energized by building places for those children who don’t get to select.

Six hundred teachers applied for approximately 100 positions among the five schools. According to initial budget projections in early November, O. Perry Walker was slated for up to 25 of them. Each teacher had to pass an initial math and writing test. The remaining pool, which still amounted to 500, had an initial interview with the school principal and assistant principal. Approximately 250 were called back for a second interview. Mrs. Laurie selected a handful of her former staff from Woodson Middle School, including a social worker who doubled as a community liaison. Three of the 25 teachers selected had taught at O. Perry Walker before the storm. The rest came primarily from schools around the New Orleans Public School system that had closed following the hurricane.

While principals carefully selected teachers based on their assessment of the teacher’s ability to perform, the United Teachers of New Orleans gasped for air. By early November, the New Orleans Public School system had essentially shut down. The number of employees had gone from more than 12,000 in April 2005, to approximately 40. With the majority of the schools under charters that had no collective bargaining agreement, the teachers union’s
membership and power base had effectively disappeared.\(^9\) According to one former teacher, the starting salary for teachers in the Algiers Charter School Association was less than in the New Orleans Public Schools. The union filed a motion to force the opening of more New Orleans district public schools in Orleans Parish Civil District Court on November 8, 2005. The court processes continue as of this writing. The survival of the New Orleans teachers union depends either on its ability to adapt to the charter system or to increase the number of district-run public schools that open.

Meanwhile, the 102 New Orleans Public Schools that the state had previously deemed failing continued to be in the sights of the Louisiana State Legislature during its 17-day special legislative session focusing on hurricane recovery that opened November 6, 2005. Governor Blanco introduced her plan at a press conference three days before the start of the session: the state would take over all the failing schools in a district that was failing. That meant New Orleans. By the end of the month, the State Legislature had passed Senate Bill 49, finally taking over the majority of New Orleans schools, placing them in the State Recovery District, run by the State Department of Education. This left the Orleans Parish School Board with a maximum of less than a dozen schools to operate as well as the ongoing ownership of all 125 school buildings. As the state reopened schools in New Orleans, it would seek charters and other operators to assist in the management of the schools. While O. Perry Walker was on this list, the state already had its operator—the Algiers Charter School Association. The state would review

\(^9\) United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) had a rich history in New Orleans. In 1972, it became the first integrated union of educators in the South. It also was the first teachers union in the Deep South to achieve collective bargaining rights in 1974 (Ritea, March 5, 2006).
O. Perry Walker’s charter status with those of all of the existing New Orleans charter schools after what remained of the 2005-2006 school year.10

Meanwhile, the Algiers Charter School Association pushed back the opening date for its West Bank schools from November 14 to December 14, 2005, to allow more time to hire staff, negotiate contracts, work on logistics and complete enrollment. The new charter school association was responsible not only for the academics and personnel, but through Alvarez and Marsal, for putting in place accounting, purchasing, communications and IT systems as well as negotiating contracts for bussing, custodial and food services. It would open on a half-day basis for two weeks in December before resuming a full school day in January, allowing time to phase in food services. By December 14, 2005, enrollment at O. Perry Walker had passed 400. Students were encouraged to finish out December at their school before attending Walker in January, when full school days would resume and the school was expected to reach its new capacity of 800, 90 percent of whom were enrolled there before the storm.

It was a warm and sunny Wednesday on December 14, 2005, when the school reopened. The parking lot was filled with new cars and rentals with license plates from as far as North Carolina—reflecting the fact that many teachers were still in the process of rebuilding their lives and resettling in New Orleans. The building was crisp and clean. The hallways were clean. The interior and exterior of the building shone with a fresh paint job. There was no gum on the walkways. All the benches and doors were in working order. There was no clutter. The teachers and staff carried themselves with a sense of purpose, sporting O. Perry Walker Chargers ties and bright smiles. Several of the male staff sported the school colors, wearing blue blazers with blue and orange ties. The women wore some combination of orange and navy blue in blouses,

sweaters, scarves, vests, skirts and pants. The atmosphere was one of enthusiasm and excitement. New plants decorated the front hallway. Everybody entered through the front door to find a functioning metal detector and two cheerful uniformed security guards. Next to the security officers, Principal Laurie stood, greeting students and families with, “Welcome to Walker.”

The entire staff and all the students assembled in the cafeteria for a morning meeting, which would become a new daily ritual—a foundation to create the culture that Mrs. Laurie sees as the number one key to site-based school reform. From there, the 279 students in attendance departed to classes, broken up alphabetically in six blocks throughout the day. Large laminated schedules, four feet wide by three feet tall, were posted throughout the front of the school. A handful of office staff, ranging from secretary to social worker, helped students sort out registration information, transportation logistics, and their schedules. The media arrived shortly after 10 am. The message in the newspapers the following day was clear: this school is making an about-face. Not only were there no fights, the students were attending class. The staff and administration had succeeded in the ACSA director’s words “in building a plane in midair.” (Tonn, 2006) “The kids are in class and the teachers are teaching, at least most of the time,” said the Director, as if to prove his success.
Chapter 3

Control, Reform and Public Confidence in a Broken System

What happened to O. Perry Walker High School in the months leading up to and immediately following Hurricane Katrina raises many questions. Why did things happen the way they did? Who is to blame for the failure of New Orleans Public Schools? Who is ultimately responsible for the schools? Who owns them? What is the media’s role? How much does perception match reality? How much does the reality matter? Does the case of O. Perry Walker point towards a larger trend? These and many more questions come out of the story of O. Perry Walker High School.

Who is to Blame?

Any discussion of the New Orleans Public Schools inevitably leads to blame. Parents blame teachers. Teachers find fault with their principals. The principals blame the school board’s central office. The central office says it is the state’s fault. The state points to the school board. The board looks to the superintendent. The superintendent blames the community. Teachers blame parents and the media. The media blames the school board. At various points, the Orleans Parish School Board blames everybody. And the spiral continues. As the cycle continues, the language becomes more abstract. The dialogue about blame becomes couched in the terminology of educational reform. The language of blame becomes about “standards” and “accountability.” Meanwhile, citizens, parents, and even elected officials, are left with even more questions and confusion.
Do we just agree that the ones who are blamed the most are the most at fault? If that is the case, the Orleans Parish School Board is clearly the most at fault for the failure of the schools. After all, they were the entity responsible for its administration before Hurricane Katrina. If the schools are taken out of their hands, will that improve things? That is the experiment the New Orleans Public Schools are trying following Hurricane Katrina. The answer will likely not be clear for a number of years.

Several fundamental questions remain. Is the failure of the New Orleans Public Schools the fault of corrupt school board members? Bad teachers? State policy makers who do not understand the challenges facing these schools? The patronage-based political system of the New Orleans Public Schools? Or are the failures simply a result of a declining economy, a shrinking population and the inability of a large, public, bureaucratic institution to adapt to change?

Two overlapping frameworks can help us make sense of the events following Hurricane Katrina in the case of O. Perry Walker High School. The first is that the struggle over the future of this school can be viewed as a battle between community control and business efficiency/professionalism models of education. The second framework is that the fight over the future of O. Perry Walker is a struggle over reputation, a battle over power, money and jobs, fought on the battleground of dialogue and actions about public education.

The Business of Education

In *The Struggle for Control of Public Education*, Michael Engel (2000) argues that American public schooling is engaged in a battle between market ideology and democratic values, and the two are distinct and exclusive. He cites major policy issues of the 1990s that mark the growing trend for market ideology to dictate governance and decision-making in public
education. Those with particular relevance to the case of O. Perry Walker include privatization, especially charter schools; collaborative and decentralized school system government and management; and national and state curriculum standards. In the case of O. Perry Walker, these trends have manifested in the state’s LEAP educational accountability program and the school’s restructuring under a charter passed by the Orleans Parish School Board granting the school’s governance to the newly-formed Algiers Charter School Association.

While Engel pursues an ideological argument that does not allow for some of the nuances and power moves of real-world politics, he reminds us that education is an industry. The annual budget of the New Orleans Public Schools before Hurricane Katrina was about $600 million. From a marketing standpoint, the New Orleans Public School system before Hurricane Katrina had more than 55,000 “customers”—its students. Textbooks, curricula, employment, athletics, custodial services, food services, transportation, advertising, management, and other major contracts provided a wealth of money making opportunities for entrepreneurs as well as corrupt politicians. Engel quotes Michael Sandler, chief executive for EduVentures, an entrepreneurial educational investment firm, from a January 31, 1996, New York Times article: “When you look at the raw numbers, this [education] is a very big industry with enormous potential for growth.”

Engel’s theoretical market ideology framework provides a foundation for analysis of what happened in the three months following Hurricane Katrina. But the decisions made in the wake of Katrina were not just ideologically driven. As Arnold Hirsch (1992) has shown, the history and politics of New Orleans have been uniquely shaped by race and class. As the largest
employer in the city before Katrina, the New Orleans Public Schools had provided some of the most secure, professional, African-American jobs in the city.\textsuperscript{11}

Recent economic trends in New Orleans complicate matters further. In an economy that has shifted over the last twenty-five years to rely more heavily on tourism, better-paying professional jobs have been replaced by hotel and restaurant management jobs. Lower-wage jobs are seen in the numerous kitchen and hotel staff jobs, those without job security that fuel the tourism industry. The economic climate drastically shapes assumptions behind decisions regarding both personnel and curriculum. The need for a highly educated workforce decreases; the system becomes as much about patronage as quality education.

This struggle along lines of race and class for control of New Orleans schools has taken form not just as a battle between market ideology and democratic values, but as a fight between community control and business efficiency/professionalism. The term “community control” was a rallying cry of the New Urban League in the 1960s. It was part of a civil rights effort to have urban schools operated by and accountable to the African-American community in which so many of them were located, both geographically and demographically. The victories of the New Urban League’s community control movement, however, have offered mixed results at best (Cronin, 1973, p.185-210).

For the purposes of this study, \textit{community control} is not simply synonymous with African-American control. In the context of twenty-first century New Orleans—a predominantly African-American city with a large majority (95 percent by 2003) of African-American students in the public schools—community control is partially, but not exclusively, about African-

\textsuperscript{11} After Hurricane Katrina, Tulane University became the largest employer in the City of New Orleans. Described as “the bastion of the white elite” by James Earl Jones, in his narration of the civil rights documentary, “A House Divided,” produced by Xavier University in the late 1980s, Tulane is known as a predominantly white institution.
American control of the public schools. The term *community control* in this study is used to refer to a locally based, democratic process by which the residents exercise influence in making decisions about the public schools. It means the families served by the system have a major say, even some meaningful oversight, about how the system operates.

Business efficiency and professionalism are influenced by market ideology, but its limits do not extend as far as Engel would like. For Engel, market ideology makes not just education, but the entire school organization and curriculum a free market commodity. Business efficiency and professionalism is the trend toward professional management and operation of public schools. It is based on the conclusion that the general public does not have the expertise to effectively run institutions of quality education. But in a study released in 2005, Philip Tetlock challenged this notion, finding that “specialists are not significantly more reliable than non-specialists in guessing what is going to happen in the region they study.” (Menand, 2005)

As shown in Figure 3, in analyzing the public discourse in the case of O. Perry Walker and the New Orleans Public Schools, one finds a divisive debate between the community control that the Orleans Parish School Board had come to represent and the privatizing business efficiency and professionalism that Alvarez and Marsal and the charter efforts of the Algiers politicians represent.

Alvarez and Marsal came to be associated with the underlying assumptions that a bottom-line, business-oriented model removes patronage and politics from school administration; schools are a business best run by professionals; public schooling is apolitical; and privatizing school financial management is financially responsible and wise. This model, however, as the public dialogue reflected, was also characterized as subversively political, racist, elitist, and ruthless (Thevenot, June 26, 2005). Opponents argue that it does not recognize the many
interlocking urban systems of which public education is a part, particularly its role in
employment and community development. The fact that the Orleans Parish School Board was
the city’s largest employer before Hurricane Katrina has already been noted several times in this
study. The impact of “corporate downsizing” in the New Orleans Public Schools on the local
economy cannot be underestimated. In addition, the impact of school closings, mergers and
bussing children from around the city to schools like Walker can be felt throughout the city.
Issues of turf, like that which arose in March 2005 at O. Perry Walker High School are just the
beginning. The openings, successes and closings of schools can make or break struggling urban
neighborhoods.

The recent manifestation of this trend can be traced back to February, 2003, and the
hiring of Anthony Amato as superintendent for the New Orleans Public Schools after a retired
military colonel with no prior public school experience proved largely ineffectual. The hiring of
Deloitte Consulting, Alvarez and Marsal, and eventually the director of the School Leadership
Center of Greater New Orleans, continued this trend towards business professionalism in
education.

It is worth noting that this supposedly apolitical solution was primarily pushed by the
State Legislature, Department of Education and BESE, all political bodies whom New
Orleanians have criticized for not adequately representing or understanding their needs. New
Orleans is one of the only Democratic parishes in a primarily Republican state (Webster, 2005).

Other questions worth consideration are: Was the Orleans Parish School Board merely
after power for power’s sake? Was it fighting to cover up personal involvement in a broken,
corrupt system? Was it fighting for something that some of its members saw as sacred? While
the Orleans Parish School Board has largely been characterized as dysfunctional and mired in its
own politics, in fact, one must also consider that it conceived its mission as fighting to hang on to local community control of the schools. As became clear in the charter re-vote on October 28, 2005, board leadership was willing to go to court, risk political clout and provide fodder for the public discourse about their ineptitude, to ensure a spot for poor children and children with special needs in a district that could easily become exclusive. Unfortunately over the last twelve months, such leadership has been dismissed as racially or politically motivated. The minority of the board may have also been grasping to hang onto black political power in a city where racial demographics were dramatically altered by Hurricane Katrina.

In *Inventing Better Schools*, Philip Schlechty (1997) proposes a publicly elected school board voting to create a charter school district as a means for public schools to remove some of the inherent problems of elected school boards without sacrificing community control. In his ideal scenario, the elected school board, as the guardian of community control, ensures the new charter district remains under community control. While community-oriented leadership at O. Perry Walker may be dramatically improving its relationship with the community, the larger question of whether the Algiers Charter Schools Association will be controlled by the community or driven by narrowing and more exclusionary interests still remains to be answered. If the Algiers Charter Schools represents a step closer to community control, one must ask, which community? The fact that the Algiers neighborhood made it through Hurricane Katrina relatively unscathed in relation to other parts of New Orleans, the charter may be a way for the middle and/or upper class in one of the city’s newer districts to separate themselves further from the urban poverty across the Mississippi River.
Figure 3.

Analysis of public discourse about school control in New Orleans during the period leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Community Control</th>
<th>Business Efficiency/Professionalism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public schools should be run democratically.</td>
<td>Politically elected leaders cannot effectively run schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools are a social institution for the public good</td>
<td>Schools are a business</td>
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<th>Schools must be run by professionals</th>
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<td>Public process</td>
<td>Minimizes corruption</td>
<td>Focus on bottom line</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Private process</td>
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<table>
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<th>Opponents say it is:</th>
<th>Inefficient</th>
<th>Racist, serving white elite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrupt</td>
<td></td>
<td>Serving business interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ruthless and uncaring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective</td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not support local and/or minority-owned businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prone to factionalizing</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporters say it is:</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Effective</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td></td>
<td>Efficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More egalitarian and equitable</td>
<td></td>
<td>Financially wise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful of social context</td>
<td>Provides better quality education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful of role schools play in community</td>
<td>Schools are disconnected from community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td>Apolitical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Broken System

A wide variety of so-called school reformers have worked to change the New Orleans Public School system in recent years. In April 2006, the most recent superintendent resigned, frustrated by unsuccessful attempts to reform the system in the months surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Dr. Watson’s resignation marked the leaving of the tenth superintendent in fourteen years. New Orleanians have elected countless school board members on reform platforms, yet they always seem to get the same result: minimal academic improvement, poor district maintenance, financial mismanagement, and political infighting.

Analysis of the crisis of the New Orleans Public Schools before Hurricane Katrina leads one to believe that the crisis is beyond the reach of any one individual. There are corrupt individuals in the system. There are employees who were hired based on patronage and are completely unqualified for the job. Yet, the failure of the New Orleans Public Schools is systemic, not simply ideological, individual or idiosyncratic. And it reflects larger trends in American society.

The Power of the Media

Democratic participation has declined to the point it is loose, passive, even symbolic and representational. As mass media becomes the primary avenue for education and democratic participation, some scholars argue that reputation has become more important than reality. Public perception trumps thoughtful decision-making (Herman and Chomsky, 1998). As elected officials, Orleans Parish School Board members are accountable to and respond to the media. The same is true for the State Legislature, the governor, BESE, and to a slightly lesser degree,
their appointees—the New Orleans Public School superintendent and State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard.

With politics a driving force, one fears the battle over the New Orleans schools may be more for reputation and public confidence than any real reform or quality education. This battle even manifests at the school level. For the teachers at O. Perry Walker High School, the media’s reports following the March 2005 “incident,” was ruining their reputation. There was no mention of the quality of the education. Reading the editorial section of the local newspapers as well as the front pages reveals this war over public discourse. Schlechty presents this theory in no uncertain terms:

Anti-public school propagandists have taken advantage of the tendency of Americans to be critical of their schools, the penchant of the press to prefer “bad news” and negative statistics, and a general ignorance among the populace regarding statistics and statistical analysis in order to create the impression that schools are worse than they really are (1997, p. 7).

Several Letters to the Editor in the Times Picayune reveal this battle over reputation, rather than substance. On November 10, 2005, as the State Legislature discussed taking over the New Orleans schools, the Orleans Parish School Board president Torin Sanders argued that the state needed the takeover, not NOPS, in a 700-word Letter to the Editor:

I believe that with this new state of affairs whoever runs the school system will be successful. Most of the old bogeymen have been eradicated. The system will be smaller, more diverse, with better buildings, unburdened by the fiscal problems of the past and strong demands of accountability from all sectors of the community that will fuel classroom achievement. Thank you, Katrina (2005).

The Reverend Sanders' pleadings and logic, however, were hardly enough to undo the Orleans Parish School Board’s last year of bad publicity. For example, one scathing article
reported on a handful of Lusher School parents criticizing the school board for its “ineptitude,” “bickering,” “ugly power struggle,” “tremendous lack of leadership” and described it as “an obstacle to progress” whose membership “advocates for themselves…not…for the children.”  
(Ritea, November 14, 2005)  

Former O. Perry Walker High School Principal Ronald Ayler’s letter to the editor in the Times Picayune in response to the California National Guardsman Sergeant’s charges shows just how important it is for school officials to try to set the record straight in the public eye. Even though a new principal had already been hired at O. Perry Walker, the former principal wanted to clear the air. “Judgments such as those rendered in the article only serve to anger community supporters and diminish the image of school personnel,” the principal argued (2005).
Chapter 4

Who Owns Schools Like These?

Leadership in a Broken System

Despite the battles for control over O. Perry Walker High School—from the Algiers politicians all the way to the state legislature and governor—ownership of O. Perry Walker High School becomes a question now of charismatic leadership and vision. Whoever creates a vision for the school owns the school. While questions abound about the future of the Algiers Charter Schools, one thing is certain. As principal, Mary Laurie—and Brian Riedlinger, to a slightly lesser degree as ACSA director—is responsible for the creation and implementation of the mission and vision for O. Perry Walker High School. She hired the teachers. She decided which students would be admitted and which ones would not. “She is kind of the Mother Teresa of education. She wants this to be a place for everybody—special needs, family troubles, it doesn’t matter,” said a special education teacher and member of the school’s leadership team. She worked to garner support for that vision from ACSA as well as the parents and community of O. Perry Walker. She also dramatically influenced the media’s interpretation of the school. She is responsible for the education the children receive and the experience their parents and community have with O. Perry Walker High School.

Mrs. Laurie speaks of parent and community involvement as central to the success of Walker. She explains the process of “multi-generational capacity building” she has begun:

You always need to work with folk to utilize their voice on behalf of [themselves and their children]. That is capacity building as I define it. Then we talk about three distinct groups. We’ve got the parents of our children here. We’ve got a number of young mothers. They are our students, but they are also somebody’s
mother. And so that’s another level of capacity building. And when you are talking about new mothers, young mothers, you are talking about parenting. But that is capacity building. And then we’ve got that third group in the whole multi-generational approach: a lot of grandparents who are now primary caregivers. So if you build the capacity for all of those groups, my vision is that ultimately, they become the primary voice on behalf of the children, their children and the children in this community. That is the only difference I see between School A and School B, between a Walker and a Lusher, between a Woodson and a Ben Franklin. It’s the capacity of the parents and the community to speak on behalf of—and that means demanding—what is right for children. And speak against what is wrong for children. That’s the difference. And so when this whole piece materializes and that primary stakeholder takes voice, that means they will start defining [the school and its vision]. And along the way, it may mean that we will need to take a primary role in defining [the school and its vision], based on our experience as the educators. But ultimately, it has to be the community that says we demand our children have a gifted class. We demand our children have an AP class, because we know. We demand that every child that comes into Walker applies for TOPS, [Tuition Opportunity Program for Students] is eligible for TOPS when they graduate. We demand our children have exposure to Vo-Tec classes, and on and on and on. We want the health clinic. We want this so it makes it user friendly for children.

While she admits much work is ahead, Mary Laurie plans to transform O. Perry Walker High School. She recognizes both the limitations and the opportunities associated with various forms of school governance structures. While opening as a charter school has allowed her more flexibility in hiring teachers, she has found herself having to think about school district management—busing, lunches, paychecks and finances—more than ever before.

[Under NOPS] we didn’t have to worry about who paid for buses—and I am talking about just to get kids to and from school. We didn’t have to worry about how the food got to the cafeteria to get prepared, so kids had lunch, kids had
breakfast. It happened. In many cases, we complained, because we knew it wasn’t as efficient as it should be. But we had something in place [with NOPS] that we did not have [with ACSA].

Charismatic Leadership

Studies in charismatic leadership have shown a correlation between personal challenge and leadership (Northouse, 2004). For Mrs. Laurie, her strong leadership may be attributed in part, to the violent death of two of her three sons in a three-year period (Thevenot, January 9, 2005). Her passion and vision come from her own crucibles, she explains:

I think it is no different than as adults, we try to spare our young mistakes. But in those areas where they have those hard learning lessons, they need to have those hard-learned lessons. When my first son was killed, my brother is a minister, he was preaching. And when he was saying things, he was talking to the adults. And he was saying to the adults that every generation has their vice. And we are no different. Our parents were always fussing at us for something. We weren’t angels. Of course you think you were when you get older. What has happened with this generation versus our generation is that this generation is making such choices that would not allow them to grow up to the point where they are mature enough to make those choices. Our generation didn’t have the murder. We grew up. We went through some times, lessons learned the hard way. But you lived long enough to get to a maturity level to make those choices. So I am saying that to say, as much as we want to spare [our children], I don’t know [that we should]. I believe wherever you are and whatever experiences you have, I think they are all part of where you’ll eventually be and who you’ll eventually be. I have reflected on this a lot. I’d like to believe I am a good educator. I am always looking to be the best at who I am. The work that I do defines who I am. Someone asked me once [if] I think that I would be as passionate about what I do if I had not lost my son. And I have done a lot of reflection on that and I believe in my whole being that I would be as passionate, because I had passion before that happened. But I’ll
never know that, because I will never be able to separate out to say that. But if that experience, the worst experience that ever happened in my lifetime, in any parent’s lifetime, has given me another level of passion for what I do, then it happened. I had to go through it to get here. I truly believe wherever you are, [it] is the sum total of every experience. It is every experience and every conversation that has led me to this point. God makes bad things happen to folk so folk can learn best.

Mrs. Laurie plans on being principal of O. Perry Walker for four or five years. She expects to build the capacity of the teachers, parents and community to continue the vision that they create. She will work within the structures she has been given—in this instance a charter school—to fulfill the same vision she realized at Woodson Middle School under the public school district governed by an elected school board before Hurricane Katrina. While the political debates and battle for control of the schools continues, she will work to ensure that O. Perry Walker High School is a mission-driven school that always focuses on the children it serves, encouraging community participation in the process.

Language and Culture in Reform

Discourse analysis of this case study of O. Perry Walker High School before it reopened on December 14, 2005, reveals that there was a war. In no uncertain terms, the discourse of schooling in New Orleans in the period surrounding Hurricane Katrina was marked by martial, violent and militaristic language. It was a language of crisis. Security was the major focus for teachers during orientation in August 2005. Beginning in June, Alvarez and Marsal staff talked about “going in” and “executing” “objectives,” as if discussing a battle plan. One leader from Alvarez and Marsal described the schools as “a war zone” on multiple occasions. An official of the State Recovery District, when explaining that Baton Rouge staff were operating in New
Orleans to open state-run public schools April, 18, 2006, described himself as “embedded”—a term that has come into common public discourse since 2003 to describe journalists reporting on the American military operation in Iraq. The California National Guard, of course, had similar language, and weapons to back it up. The photographs accompanying this study show several members of the National Guard armed while painting the otherwise empty school building. O. Perry Walker had become contested ground, not just for students from warring neighborhoods, but for the teachers and the Orleans Parish School Board.

This language shifted dramatically under the new governance of O. Perry Walker following Hurricane Katrina. Under the leadership of Mary Laurie and Brian Riedlinger, the organizational culture at O. Perry Walker dramatically shifted. Culture, Mrs. Laurie offers, is the first of the six critical elements she says are key to transforming schools:

The culture is defining. Culture is what sustains over time, not individuals. It is a culture that has been established. It is the culture that inaugurates new folks as they come on board, be that children, parents, staff. That is sustainability with school reform, I think.

The culture of insecurity and violence began to shift under the new principal. It became a culture of positive support and success. The evidence of this initial case study of O. Perry Walker points toward the fact that the solution to the schools crisis may not be so much about how schools are governed or the shape of the buildings, as the culture and language in which they operate.

**Implications of O. Perry Walker for Educational Reform**

While the full ramifications of the changes at O. Perry Walker High School following Hurricane Katrina have yet to be revealed, several things are clear. All of the actors in the
struggle for control over O. Perry Walker High School and the New Orleans Public Schools claimed to be acting in the best interests of the students. But after all the backroom politicking, heated debates and court cases, what impact did the struggle for control have on the quality of education at O. Perry Walker High School? What difference did it make to the students and their families? The ultimate difference was minimal. Both NOPS Superintendent Ora Watson and ACSA Director Brian Riedlinger, as professional educators, knew to hire strong principals.

Mary Laurie would have been principal of O. Perry Walker whether it was run by the Orleans Parish School Board or the Algiers Charter School Association. Her flexibility in hiring teachers would have been more limited if the school had opened under the jurisdiction of the school board. It would have made it more difficult for her to establish a new culture at O. Perry Walker. On the other hand, the administrative side of the school—the books, transportation, meals, paychecks, etc.—might have been smoother.

The story of O. Perry Walker reinforces a theory that even one of the leaders of Alvarez and Marsal believed with their limited experience in education:

I think there is a correlation: great principals, clean schools; so-so principals, dirty schools. Everywhere I go—St. Louis is the same thing—give me a [great] principal and you can look at the kids, not only with beautiful schools, but you can also see performance-wise how well the kids are doing.

In the end, the arguments and politics of school control do more to sell books and newspapers than affect the quality of education for children. The unprecedented “reforms” that shook up the New Orleans school system and its community following Hurricane Katrina were not reforms. They were simply steps in a restructuring driven by crisis. The restructuring and chartering of O. Perry Walker High School and numerous other New Orleans Public Schools were an act of survival. The struggles for power, control, jobs and money were certainly real.
Hundreds of millions of dollars, countless reputations, the future of the largest employer in New Orleans and the future of public institutions in the city were all at stake.

But the main impact that the struggle over the schools had on the students of O. Perry Walker High School was that it delayed the opening of their school by three and a half months after Hurricane Katrina. For all that was done in the name of children, little was accomplished on their behalf. The quality of their education still depended on the vision of the principal and the quality of the school leadership at O. Perry Walker High School. And by the time it reopened, they were in good hands.
References


Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL). 1999. The Progress of Education in Louisiana. Austin, TX: SEDL.


# Appendix A

## Chronology of Relevant Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Key Player(s)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/18/1970</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School opens</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/11/2000</td>
<td>LEAP test first implemented as &quot;high stakes&quot; over OPSB objections</td>
<td>BESE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/18/2000</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School deemed by state to be &quot;academically unacceptable&quot;</td>
<td>BESE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/10/2004</td>
<td>Governor signs Act 193 into law, granting unprecedented power to NOPS Superintendent</td>
<td>State Legislature, Governor Kathleen Blanco, OPSB, NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/2/2004</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board elections</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/10/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Parish School Board members sworn in</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/15/2005</td>
<td>A fight breaks out at O. Perry Walker High in which 20 students are arrested</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Students, Staff &amp; Teachers, NOPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/17/2005</td>
<td>Student shot in leg at O. Perry Walker High School</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Students, Staff &amp; Teachers, NOPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/24/2005</td>
<td>All former Orleans Parish teachers no longer teaching are terminated.</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5/2005</td>
<td>Reports surface that Orleans Parish School Board is nearly out of money</td>
<td>OPSB, NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/12/2005</td>
<td>Superintendent Anthony Amato resigns</td>
<td>OPSB, NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/13/2005</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board votes to enter a 90-day contract with Deloitte Consulting to manage non-academic operations</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/14/2005</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board votes to appoint Dr. Ora Watson Interim Superintendent</td>
<td>OPSB, NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/16/2005</td>
<td>Algiers Group and Algiers politicians meet to discuss future of West Bank public schools</td>
<td>Algiers Group, Algiers politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/23/2005</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board votes to enter a two-year contract with Alvarez and Marsal</td>
<td>OPSB, A&amp;M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/8/2005</td>
<td>State House of Representatives approves 1,200 vouchers for NOPS children to attend private schools</td>
<td>OPSB, State Legislature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/3/2005</td>
<td>Teachers and staff of O. Perry Walker return to campus for orientation</td>
<td>OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/17/2005</td>
<td>2005-2006 School year opens</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Key Player(s)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>8/20/2005</td>
<td>Alvarez and Marsal complete an initial Reduction In Force for Orleans Parish School Board</td>
<td>OPSB, A&amp;M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/27/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Public Schools declare all Orleans Parish schools closed until August 30.</td>
<td>NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/28/2005</td>
<td>Mayor declares mandatory evacuation of City of New Orleans</td>
<td>Mayor C. Ray Nagin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/29/2005</td>
<td>Hurricane Katrina hits</td>
<td>Hurricane Katrina</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/31/2005</td>
<td>Reports estimate 80 percent of the City of New Orleans has been flooded</td>
<td>Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/2/2005</td>
<td>All Orleans Parish School Board teachers furloughed</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/5/2005</td>
<td>Alvarez and Marsal representatives gather at School for Deaf in Baton Rouge</td>
<td>A&amp;M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/6/2005</td>
<td>Mayor declares all New Orleans residents must evacuate the city</td>
<td>Mayor C. Ray Nagin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/6/2005</td>
<td>Alvarez and Marsal representatives begin to evaluate school facilities</td>
<td>OPSB, A&amp;M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/15/2005</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board meets in Baton Rouge at State Department of Education, grants K-12 charter to Lusher School</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/16/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Public School Board declares O. Perry Walker High School will reopen</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/16/2005</td>
<td>NOPS appoints Mrs. Laurie Principal of O. Perry Walker High School</td>
<td>NOPS Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/17/2005</td>
<td>Mayor declares first New Orleans neighborhoods safe to return: Algiers, Central Business District, French Quarter and parts of Uptown</td>
<td>Mayor C. Ray Nagin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/19/2005</td>
<td>National Guard begins work in O. Perry Walker High School</td>
<td>CNG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/30/2005</td>
<td>Mayor announces formation of Bring New Orleans Back Commission</td>
<td>Mayor C. Ray Nagin, BNOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/30/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Public Schools issue request for parents to indicate intent to return as part of school reopening plan</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/2005</td>
<td>Future Algiers Charter School Association convenes at the home of Jim Tucker</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/2005</td>
<td>First round of cuts of former Orleans Parish School Board teachers</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/3/2005</td>
<td>Teachers refused access to O. Perry Walker campus</td>
<td>OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/7/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Public School Board approves Type IV Charter for Algiers schools</td>
<td>OPSB, ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/7/2005</td>
<td>Governor Kathleen Blanco signs Executive Order loosening state requirements for charter schools</td>
<td>Algiers politicians, Governor Kathleen Blanco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/14/2005</td>
<td>Civil District Court Judge Nadine Ramsey approves a two-week restraining order to halt charter school plans.</td>
<td>Civil District Court, OPSB, Algiers Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/14/2005</td>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board meets and discusses the process by which the schools were chartered</td>
<td>OPSB, ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Key Player(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/17/2005</td>
<td>Algiers Charter School Association officially incorporated by Louisiana Secretary of State</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/27/2005</td>
<td>Civil District Court Judge Lloyd Medley rules Orleans Parish School Board must revote on charter schools</td>
<td>Civil District Court, OPSB, Algiers Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/28/2005</td>
<td>New Orleans Public School Board votes 6-0 to allow Algiers Charter Schools and eight other schools with five charter operators.</td>
<td>OPSB, ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/2005</td>
<td>ACSA appoints Mary Laurie principal of O. Perry Walker High School and Brian Gibson, Assistant Principal</td>
<td>ACSA, OPW New Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/2005</td>
<td>Second round of cuts of former Orleans Parish School Board teachers</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/2005</td>
<td>Algiers Charter School Association hosts initial meeting, approves an operating budget and hire interim directors</td>
<td>OPSB, ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/8/2005</td>
<td>United Teachers of New Orleans files a motion in Civil District Court to force OPSB to reopen schools</td>
<td>OPSB, UTNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/18/2005</td>
<td>Algiers Charter School Association Board adopts by-laws at organizational meeting</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/30/2005</td>
<td>Governor Blanco signs House Bill 121 into law, putting the state in control of 102 New Orleans Public schools deemed failing by BESE.</td>
<td>BESE, OPSB, State Legislature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/30/2005</td>
<td>California National Guard departs</td>
<td>CNG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/1/2005</td>
<td>New teachers of O. Perry Walker High School hired</td>
<td>ACSA, OPW New Principal, OPW New Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/14/2005</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School reopens as Charter School for half days</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/14/2005</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School reopens for full days</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/12/2006</td>
<td>State Board of Ethics rules membership in both ACSA and OPSB is conflict of interest</td>
<td>ACSA, OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/27/2006</td>
<td>Bring New Orleans Back Commission receives report from Education Committee</td>
<td>Mayor C. Ray Nagin, BNOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/30/2006</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School reaches maximum student capacity</td>
<td>ACSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/31/2006</td>
<td>Fourth round of cuts of former Orleans Parish School Board teachers</td>
<td>OPSB, OPW Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/10/2006</td>
<td>First PTO meeting at O. Perry Walker High School</td>
<td>OPW Teachers, OPW PTO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/8/2006</td>
<td>O. Perry Walker High School hosts Open House for parents and community</td>
<td>OPW Teachers, OPW PTO, OPW Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/17/2006</td>
<td>Last member of OPSB resigns from ACSA in response to State Board of Ethics ruling</td>
<td>ACSA, OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/11/2006</td>
<td>Interim Superintendent Ora Watson resigns</td>
<td>OPSB, NOPS Superintendent</td>
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Dates marked with shading are approximate
# Appendix B

## List of Actors

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Geographic Base</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Role in OPW School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alvarez and Marsal</td>
<td>Private turnaround firm hired in June 2005 to fix school system finances</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Private Company</td>
<td>Non-academic operations management of New Orleans Public Schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring New Orleans Back Commission</td>
<td>Commission formed by Mayor to make recommendations on New Orleans school system</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Advisors</td>
<td>Supported charter schools as &quot;stop-gap&quot; measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Ray Nagin</td>
<td>Mayor of the City of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, 2002-2006</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>OPW alumnus who considered taking over New Orleans schools as mayor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algiers Group</td>
<td>Group of 70 Algiers community leaders, primarily African-American ministers</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Opposed process of chartering Algiers Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algiers politicians</td>
<td>Informal group of Algiers politicians, ministers and business leaders</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Worked to charter Algiers Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Arthur Wardsworth</td>
<td>Pastor of Second Good Hope Baptist and Mount Pilgrim</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Led opposition of chartering Algiers Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacquelyn Clarkson</td>
<td>City Council District C Representative</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Represents Algiers in City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Tucker</td>
<td>Republican State Representative for Algiers, District 86, 2001-2006</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>OPW alumnus actively involved in pursuing charters for Algiers schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lourdes Moran</td>
<td>OPSB District 4 Representative and Board VP during Katrina, President of ACSA Board, October 2005-March 2006</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Credited with authoring Algiers Charter school request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil District Court Judges</td>
<td>Clarify legal boundaries for local school governance</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>Settled questions about public process and limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda Mitchell</td>
<td>President of United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), the teachers’ union</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Represent and protect teachers before Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Geographic Base</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Role in OPW School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board</td>
<td>Seven-member, locally elected school board</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>Governed OPW High School before Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen Blanco</td>
<td>Governor of Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
<td>State Politician</td>
<td>Passed executive order allowing Algiers Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)</td>
<td>Elected governing board of state Department of Education</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
<td>Legislator</td>
<td>Labeled OPW failing 2002-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen Blanco</td>
<td>Governor of Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
<td>State Politician</td>
<td>Passed executive order allowing Algiers Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana State Board of Education (BESE)</td>
<td>Elected governing board of state Department of Education</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
<td>Legislator</td>
<td>Labeled OPW failing 2002-2005</td>
</tr>
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<td>Governor of Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
<td>State Politician</td>
<td>Passed executive order allowing Algiers Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Amato</td>
<td>ACSA Director, President of the School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans, Member of Committee for a Better New Orleans</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Administration of school before Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Riedlinger</td>
<td>School principal with a track record for school turnaround in New Orleans</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Administration of school after Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Ayler</td>
<td>Principal at O. Perry Walker before Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Geographic Base</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Role in OPW School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California National Guard</td>
<td>Reserve military force for national security, stationed in New Orleans</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Professional Security/Military</td>
<td>Repair and renovations of OPW after Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans Police Department</td>
<td>City of New Orleans public police force</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Professional Security/Military</td>
<td>Made multiple arrests at OPW High School in Spring, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algiers Charter School</td>
<td>Seven-member (non-democratically elected) school board in charge of 13 West Bank schools</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>School system managers</td>
<td>Administration of Algiers Charter Schools, including OPW High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O. Perry Walker Students</td>
<td>Main constituency of school</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Conspicuously absent from dialogue Despite attempted participation, mostly waited to see when school would open after Hurricane Katrina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O. Perry Walker Parents</td>
<td>&quot;Key stakeholder,&quot; according to O. Perry Walker Principal, Mary Laurie</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix C

## Ownership of New Orleans public schools

**January 15, 2005, August 15, 2005 and January 15, 2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January 15, 2005</th>
<th># of schools operating</th>
<th># of (existing) schools permitted to operate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Charter Schools</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BESE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**August 15, 2005**

| Orleans Parish School Board | 117 | 124 |
| Independent Charter Schools | 8 | 8 |
| BESE* | 4 | 4 |

**January 15, 2006**

| Orleans Parish School Board*** | 4 | 8 |
| Independent Charter Schools (not with Algiers Charter School Association) | 13 | 20 |
| BESE | 4 | 106** |
| Algiers Charter School Association | 5 | 13 |

*Over the summer of 2005, BESE incorporated 3 schools into the Recovery School District, granting charters out to existing organizations, including the University of New Orleans, Southern University of New Orleans, and the Knowledge Is Power (KIP) program. In this figure, these are shown both as Independent Charter Schools and as BESE schools.

**This increase includes the existing charters BESE had granted by August, 2005 as well as the 102 schools newly incorporated into the Recovery School District in the November legislative session. All but two of the schools in the Algiers Charter School Association are also included in the state's Recovery School District.

***The Orleans Parish School Board continues to responsible for maintenance and ownership of all 128 of its school buildings.
Appendix D

Interviews

October 24, 2005 – Interview with City Council District C Representative

October 26, 2005 - Interview with California National Guard

December 5, 2005 – Interview with Alvarez and Marsal

January 28, 2006 – Interview with O. Perry Walker High School Leadership Team

March 14, 2006 – Interview with O. Perry Walker High School Principal

March 29, 2006 – Interview with Algiers Charter School Association

March 30, 2006 – Interview with former O. Perry Walker teacher

April 20, 2006 – Interview with current O. Perry Walker teacher
Vita

David Hamilton Simons-Jones grew up in rural public schools until 8th grade in Columbia County in the Hudson Valley region of New York State. He graduated magna cum laude from Phillips Academy, Andover before receiving his B.A. from Tulane University in 2001. He has worked as the Director of Community Service for Tulane University since his graduation. He has particular interests in culture, critical pedagogy, youth leadership, service learning, national service, social justice and public education.