Douglas N. Harris. *Charter School City: What the End of Traditional Public Schools in New Orleans Means for American Education*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 352 pp.

Walter C. Stern

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a small, mostly unelected group of White people orchestrated the transformation of the New Orleans public school system, whose students were almost exclusively poor and Black. Under the new regime, the state assumed authority over most schools. Officials then transferred the operation of nearly all of them to nonprofit charter school organizations, which ran them according to terms specified in performance-based contracts with the government. Local and state authorities eliminated geographically based attendance zones, enabling families to apply to any school in the city. The government also gained the power to close, take over, or change the management of schools that did not meet their performance targets, and a robust nonprofit sector developed to handle many administrative tasks that the school district previously managed. Lastly, schools gained greater authority over formerly unionized teachers, who lost their jobs and collective bargaining agreement after the storm.

Economist Douglas N. Harris reports that these reforms shifted the composition of the New Orleans teacher corps from three-quarters Black to majority White (with many of the newcomers hired through organizations such as Teach For America), maintained segregation, and diluted the input that voters in the majority Black city had over their public schools. But Harris demonstrates that the reforms also "were successful in improving every measurable outcome, from test scores to college graduation" (p. 80). Harris's rigorous analyses show that by 2015, "the reforms increased test scores by 12–15 percentiles, high school graduation by 3–9 percentage points, college entry by 8–15 percentage points, and college graduation by 3–5 percentage points" (p. 87). These gains were notable because many people viewed New Orleans as one of the nation's most troubled school districts prior to 2005. Among the many questions these findings raise, however, is whether these academic improvements justified the social, political, and economic costs.

Harris does not answer this question directly. Rather, he seeks to understand what drove academic improvement and to identify the lessons New Orleans provides for public school reform nationally. Harris tests a number of factors that market theory—and school choice advocates—highlight as potential drivers of academic gains in a market-based system. These include the autonomy schools gained to hire and fire teachers, the competition that emerged between schools for students and resources, the ostensibly expanded choices that families received to select schools, and the government's new role as an authorizer and contractor with the power to shutter, take over, or transfer the management of low-performing schools.

Harris analyzed these factors through what he describes as "one of the largest studies of a single school district ever conducted" (p. 14). In the course of his research, he and his team at the Educational Research Alliance for New Orleans produced more than thirty academic reports. They and their associates surveyed and interviewed students, parents, educators, and reform leaders, and compiled and analyzed large data sets from sources such as New Orleans's centralized enrollment system (introduced in 2012), the Louisiana Department of Education, and the National Student Clearinghouse. (For the sake of disclosure, I want to note that I received compensation to assist with the administration of Harris's teacher surveys while in graduate school at Tulane University. Prior to graduate school, I also managed one of the teacher recruitment programs he describes in the book.)

Harris finds that the new and aggressive role that the state government played in authorizing, closing, and transferring management of charter schools "was the most direct and immediate cause of students' measurable academic improvement" (p. 178). This leads him to conclude that the reforms succeeded not because of a wholly unregulated or privatized market but because reform leaders responded to market failures and redefined the role of government in regulating schooling. Government, he asserts, still has a role to play in education, even if that role might look different than it has in traditionally structured school districts in which nonprofit organizations play a relatively minor role.

This argument is significant as a repudiation of both steadfast proponents and opponents of charter schools. It also contrasts sharply with critiques of the racialized impacts of school closures and takeovers from scholars such as Elizabeth Todd-Breland. The differences here are matters of emphasis, framing, and context. While Todd-Breland centers Black people's responses to disinvestment and institutional racism in her study of school reform in Chicago, Harris focuses on White reformers who generally divorced New Orleans's educational challenges from their historical context. Differences such as these highlight the meaningful stakes embedded within educational research.

Like many educational scholars, Harris is interested in power: who wields it, how, and to what ends. As an economist, he considers these questions through the interplay between government and markets. However, he examines the political economy of urban education more narrowly than many historians. Most notably, he pays limited attention to the public policies and political and economic structures that have historically shaped and constrained cities, their schools, and their schooling markets. His discussion of segregation, for instance, skates over decades of historical research stressing state action as a primary driver. Instead, he asserts that "there is debate about the degree to which people self-segregate versus being pushed into segregated settings by norms, laws, and other governmental policies" (p. 274, note 46). This treatment leaves readers without a clear understanding of why New Orleans public schools struggled so mightily prior to Katrina or whether the post-storm reforms actually addressed those root causes.

Harris's book is therefore most valuable in conjunction with works that illuminate the ways in which the conditions confronting urban public schools are closely linked to the social, political, and economic lives of cities and their suburbs. Urban historians, from Arnold Hirsch to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, for instance, have extensively

documented how racist policies and practices in government and the private sector structured modern American metropolises. Historians of education such as Jack Dougherty, Karen Benjamin, and Ansley Erickson have also demonstrated how schools both shaped, and were shaped by, their racially inequitable metropolitan contexts. My own book on New Orleans illustrates how the school board there collaborated with real estate professionals and municipal and federal policymakers to construct and institutionalize White supremacy before and after the *Brown* decision. Drawing upon these other scholars, I frame that story as a process of government creating and maintaining racialized schooling and housing markets. The challenges facing urban schools, this literature reminds us, are not easily disentangled from the challenges facing cities.

Harris does broadly acknowledge the racially inequitable conditions in which New Orleans schools operated before and after Hurricane Katrina. He also straightforwardly describes the ways in which the New Orleans reforms undermined democratic participation in public schooling, enabled schools to exclude or push out students they viewed as undesirable, and transferred power and resources from Black to White hands. (The latter was especially notable in terms of the post-Katrina shifts in teaching, administrative, and nonprofit jobs like the one I once held.) Additionally, he finds that "school choice" often failed to give families the options they really wanted, which were neighborhood schools with robust offerings.

Harris concludes his book with the lessons Americans can draw from New Orleans. While he identifies five roles that government can play to counteract inequities and provide "Democratic Choice," his focus strictly on schools suggests—possibly with unwarranted optimism—that meaningful educational reform is feasible within existing social, political, and economic arrangements.

doi:10.1017/heq.2021.16

Amaka Okechukwu. *To Fulfill These Rights: Political Struggle Over Affirmative Action and Open Admissions*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 328 pp.

Natasha Warikoo

Tufts University

In *To Fulfill These Rights: Political Struggle Over Affirmative Action and Open Admissions,* Amaka Okechukwu tells us the story of two policies that aimed to increase the representation of Black and Latinx students on college campuses: open admissions (at City University of New York) and affirmative action (at University of California, Berkeley and the University of Michigan). Through detailed research and analysis, Okechukwu painstakingly explains legal battles, ballot initiatives, elected