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# **Charter School “Miracle” In Post-Katrina New Orleans?: Youth Participatory Action Research And The Future Of Education Reform**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a youth participatory action research (YPAR) study, which was conducted through a theoretical lens incorporating the social justice youth policy framework and Critical Race Theory. Led by youth from the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association (VAYLA), the study explored the impacts of post-Katrina school reforms on student experiences at six New Orleans high schools. The findings from the study exposed troubling educational disparities by race, class, limited English status, and geography. The YPAR project’s results counter neoliberal reform advocates’ narrative of a post-Katrina New Orleans school “miracle.” This article illuminates YPAR as both research method and pathway for the future of urban school reform to include youth as engaged stakeholders.

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## **Introduction**

Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Louisiana swiftly changed its education laws, easing the establishment of charter schools (Buras, 2011). The drastic reforms led to a wholesale adoption of the neoliberal education policy agenda, characterized by principles of privatization and beliefs that market-based competition can lead to increased efficiencies in public schooling (Apple, 2006). Guided by neoliberal values, the post-Katrina school system in New Orleans is, “. . . premised on decentralization, managerial networks, and choice” (Buras, 2009, p. 4). New Orleans is the first major urban school system, supported by public tax monies, to have a majority of students attending schools privately operated and governed by unelected independent boards. Because charter schools function with a high level of freedom from public oversight (Ravitch, 2010), proponents argue that they provide opportunities for educational innovations. However, critics argue that they represent a movement to transform urban education for profit-driven rather than public education interests (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Lubienski, 2001).

To advance the charter school reform movement nationally, neoliberal policy advocates hold up the reorganized New Orleans system of privatized education as a model (Steele, Vernez, Gottfried, & Schwam-Baird, 2011), or even as a post-Katrina “miracle,” in the mainstream media (Carr, 2010). Presenting a dubious comparison of standardized test scores from before and after Hurricane Katrina, charter school proponents argue that the post-Katrina model of reform in New Orleans of unrestrained charter school growth should be applied nationally (Buras, 2011). The reorganization and state takeover of the New Orleans public school system occurred without public scrutiny amidst the post-storm displacement of city residents, the vast majority of whom are people of color. One of the very first acts by the state immediately following the hurricane was to assume authority over the city’s schools and to encourage educational entrepreneurship (Buras, 2011). Educational entrepreneurship is defined by creativity in school leadership and curriculum development that is independent from traditional public school structures (Smith & Petersen, 2006). Such projects receive capital investments from private and public sources.

To counter the anti-democratic effects of the neoliberal urban school reform movement and to assert the voices of New Orleans youth into the ongoing school reform debates, we present an evaluation of six New Orleans high schools six years after Hurricane Katrina conducted by members of the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA). VAYLA is a youth-led community-based organization that emerged out of a successful environmental justice campaign following the devastating storms and flooding in

2005. Located in the Versailles neighborhood on the farthest eastern edge of the city, VAYLA's mission is to empower local youth to create positive social change. The youth researchers in this project are among the thousands of New Orleans schoolchildren who have been subjected to the city's great education experiment. They acknowledge the failures of their schools before the storm, but also critically question the post-Katrina reform agenda, pointing to persistent inequalities they experience everyday in the neoliberal education lab.

Skeptical of a charter school "miracle" in their city, the youth researchers along with their adult allies listed as contributors to this paper set out to evaluate the performance of their high schools according to a set of community-determined criteria of educational quality. While charter school advocates claim to be advancing principles of accountability, VAYLA's youth participatory action research (YPAR) project emphasized the importance of holding urban school policymakers accountable to students and families according to a grassroots criteria of quality schooling. YPAR was chosen as the research method, because it aligned with VAYLA's values of youth empowerment and leadership. It approaches research using a lens that privileges the perspectives of youth.

The youth-led evaluation of six high schools in New Orleans can be understood through a theoretical lens incorporating Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ginwright, Noguera, and Cammarota's (2005) social justice youth policy framework. The conceptual framework is presented after a brief literature review, which is provided to contextualize the significance of the research project and findings presented in this manuscript. After the research methods of this project are explained, results are summarized. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion of the study's findings and implications.

The objectives of this article are two-fold. First, it challenges neoliberal education reformers' claims that there is a post-Katrina education "miracle" in New Orleans, by presenting VAYLA's YPAR study and findings, which detail persistent educational inequalities in the city. Second, it demonstrates the liberatory, social justice effects of YPAR can have to empower youth to become key players in the education policymaking process. Through the YPAR method and study, VAYLA has gained prominence and respect as an important representative of youth perspectives on the city's school policies. This project illuminates YPAR as both research method and pathway for the future of urban school reform to include youth as engaged stakeholders.

## **Literature**

This section provides a brief summary of relevant literature on the neoliberal urban school reform agenda and projects of youth resistance. Nationally, the charter school and accountability movement has been framed through a savior narrative. Leaders from both major political parties at the national, state, and local levels have embraced the charter school movement and other market-based reform efforts as invaluable means to address educational disparities and alleged mismanagement (Lubienski, 2001). Countering these claims, social justice-oriented scholars have critically challenged the neoliberal reform agenda, exposing its racially exploitative effects (Buras, 2011). Within the neoliberal educational policy context shaping urban schools, research on youth resistance projects has also emerged.

**Exposing the neoliberal savior.** The New Orleans model of urban school reform emerged from dominant ideological currents rooted in neoliberal principles for public services. Drawing from the portfolio management model (PMM) approach, it incorporates three contemporary trends in education policy that diverge from Progressive Era reforms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: market-based principles, standards-based reform principles, and school differentiation or diversification in the market of schools. This array of policy ideas is ideologically rooted in neoliberalism and a business-oriented worldview, which favors privatization and deregulation of the public sector, defining people as consumers rather than citizens. From this standpoint, “private is always better than public” (Reed, 2006, p. 26). Those on the left charge that privatization in sectors such as education are driven by a desire to pillage public commodities and create opportunities for the investor class. According to Harvey (2006), “The primary aim has been to open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded as off-limits to the calculus of profitability” (p. 44), including education and social welfare provision. The business-oriented worldview also drives the new paradigm’s emphasis on standards-based accountability (Menefee-Libey, 2010). Organizations and people are held accountable to specific outcomes of schooling as measured by testing data, just as employees and operational units in the corporate world are evaluated based on their contribution to a firm’s profit margins. In this arrangement, student test scores are analogous to corporate profits; and according to this view, both can be best achieved in a competitive, free market environment.

Reinforced by a savior narrative, neoliberal educational reforms are often imposed on urban school settings to rescue troubled schools with enrollments predominantly consisting of low-income students of color. From the 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman*, to *BusinessWeek* asking, “Can business save New York city schools?” (France, 2003), to hopes that neoliberal reform leader Michelle Rhee could save DC schools (Thomas, 2008), the mainstream media has characterized market-based reforms and charter schools as much-needed efforts to save struggling communities of color (Hankins & Martin, 2006). Under the

cover of this savior framework, the neoliberal education reform agenda has implemented projects of racialized dispossession that especially impact low-income African American communities (Buras, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Bartlett et al., 2002).

To challenge and expose these narratives, social justice-oriented education scholars have drawn critical attention to the ways in which neoliberal reforms within the context of globalization and the urban political economy are exacerbating race and class inequalities. Some research has shown how the charter school reform movement in New Orleans and other cities engages in a project of racialized appropriation of community assets from low-income communities of color for the accumulation of wealth by and for the privilege of White elites (Buras, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Lipman, 2004; Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002). This has occurred under the guise of a discursive framework (Kumashiro, 2008) claiming values of educational equity and closing racial achievement gaps. Indeed, Buras (2011) argues, “Although market-based educational reforms in New Orleans are presented by policy makers as innovative and democratic, they are nonetheless premised on the criminal dispossession of black working class communities and teachers and students . . .” (p. 297). Moreover, the process of charter school formation can maintain race and class inequalities in the inclusion and exclusion of stakeholders from school governance (Stambach & Becker, 2006). Still, political support persists for charter schools and other neoliberal projects even though some scholarship is emerging to point out their failures (Hursh, 2007).

**YPAR as youth development and critical pedagogy for social justice.** Within the everyday terrains of neoliberal school reforms, young people are engaged in various forms of resistance (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). The literature on YPAR and youth activism highlights the voices and perspectives of young people experiencing the effects of neoliberal school reforms. A key objective and outcome of interest in this field is the development of critical consciousness<sup>2</sup> and skills for political engagement among young people. Much of this scholarship focuses on the ways in which YPAR presents critical youth development possibilities for social justice (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Watts & Guessous, 2006; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) through collective action (Kwon, 2008). Another area of inquiry related to YPAR and youth activism scholarship is concerned with how these forms of youth resistance represent important efforts in critical pedagogy (Buras, Randels, & Salaam, 2010; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Kirshner,

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<sup>2</sup> Critical consciousness or *conscientization*, as Freire (1993) called it, is the ability to understand the social, economic, and political structures that shape one’s life circumstances. In achieving this level of profound understanding of social contexts, one may be empowered to act as social agents to change the world.

2006). In the end, these projects represent efforts by youth and adult allies to affirm their agency to resist injustices and to transform their communities (Ginwright & James, 2002; Giroux, 1983).

**Reclaiming education accountability through youth research and activism.** Various studies have presented youth resistance as responses to unjust social, political, and economic contexts in their communities and schools. Hosang (2006) contends that youth organizing and youth organizations are important projects and sites for challenging dominant, hegemonic political ideology. Even though education policies directly affect the lives of young people, their voices are rarely valued in spaces of policymaking (Ginwright et al., 2005). However, youth can and must play an important role in debates and policy decision-making processes to advance educational equity and access (Shah & Mediratta, 2008).

This paper presents a YPAR study conducted by New Orleans youth and adult allies in an effort to hold education reformers accountable to students in the city's schools. Rather than focus on the YPAR project's outcomes in youth development or implications for pedagogical practices, this study contributes to community-based critiques of the neoliberal reform agenda. More importantly, it provides an example of how YPAR can and should be applied as a political praxis (Freire, 1993) to critically transform the context of urban school policies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was conducted through a conceptual lens that features the social justice youth policy framework (Ginwright et al., 2005) and a CRT lens. The YPAR project evaluated the post-Katrina New Orleans school "miracle" from the perspectives of youth who have direct experiences with the system. Applying the social justice youth policy framework (Ginwright et al., 2005), the project assumed that youth, as critical community actors who can transform the conditions of their communities, have a right to participate in the creation of public policies. The project also applied a CRT approach by challenging dominant narratives and privileging the experiential knowledge of those who have been racially marginalized (Yosso, 2006). As a youth-led collective, we sought to conduct a rigorous research project that challenged the dominant master narrative of a post-Katrina New Orleans school "miracle" allegedly produced by neoliberal leaders and their reforms.

### **Methods: Evaluating the "Miracle"**

In June 2010, VAYLA's education equity project team recognized that to be a respected participant in the city's school reform debates, it had to support its claims with evidence. To start the YPAR project, the group discussed mainstream media reports framing New Orleans school

reforms as a “miracle.” During this conversation, one of the youth researchers sharply asked, “What part of New Orleans are they talking about?” His question emerged from personal experiences and countered the narrative of miraculous educational improvement in the city. This young scholar’s question demonstrated that an honest evaluation of the state of New Orleans schools should start with students’ perspectives. Therefore, the main question guiding this research project asked: According to students, what is the state of public education in post-Katrina New Orleans?

In YPAR, young people impacted by a policy or institution are given the tools to research that system and define the scope of their inquiry. YPAR is characterized by the following three principles:

1. Collective investigation of a problem;
2. Reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem;
3. Desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with stated problems (Morrell, 2008, p. 157).

Canella (2008) explains that this methodological approach counters most social scientific research by filling, “. . . the intellectual void that occurs when people’s voices are left out of the research and thus policy decisions that affect their lives and opportunities” (p. 205).

The YPAR study, conducted between June 2010 and September 2011, is the result of a collaborative project between youth researchers, ranging in age from 14 to 20, and adult allies including the co-authors of this paper. The timeline of the study was as follows:

- Planning and preparation: June – September 2010
- Interviews and community forums: September – October 2010
- Questionnaire designed and finalized: October – December 2010
- Survey data collection: January – February 2011
- Survey data analysis: March – May 2011
- Report completed and publicly released: September 2011

The youth scholars included a core group of twelve youth leaders and twenty additional youth volunteers. While the majority of the youth leaders were Vietnamese American, two of the primary youth scholar-activists were young African American men, who were invited by friends to join VAYLA and the education equity project. Calling their project the Raise Your Hand Campaign (RYHC), their mission was to promote equal access to quality education for geographically, economically, or linguistically marginalized students in New Orleans.

The co-authors of this article served as two of the primary adult allies to the youth scholar-activists in this project. Jacob has been involved as a volunteer at the youth organization since 2008, and is currently working full-time as its assistant director. The RYHC team and Jacob invited OiYan to join the YPAR project as an adult ally and research mentor in August 2010. Jacob was on-hand at VAYLA on a daily basis. OiYan visited VAYLA in New Orleans three times between August 2010 and May 2011, to provide guidance for data collection methods and analysis. Committed to ensuring that leadership was firmly in the hands of youth, both co-authors conducted themselves as facilitators in the research project to support the collective's decision-making process and leadership.

Both co-authors are ethnic and geographic outsiders, and have worked to be cognizant of their status and privileges as well as cultural differences. Jacob identifies as a Jewish man from San Francisco. OiYan is a second generation Chinese American woman from Boston. The project was partially supported by funds from the Southeast Asian Resource and Action Center (SEARAC) and the UCLA Institute for American Cultures and Asian American Studies Center.

The study's research approach and process of privileging youth experiences and perspectives emanated from the study's CRT framework. We began the project with three leadership-team retreats over the summer of 2010 to plan our research project with an aim to evaluate the supposed school reform miracle in New Orleans. During these retreats and subsequent conversations and workshops with adult supporters, the youth surveyed and considered a range of research method options such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, and visual sociology and ethnography. They also considered research ethics in planning for the project. After the leadership retreats, the RYHC youth researchers set out to examine the hypothesis that post-Katrina reforms had created an equitable and quality educational experience for all students.

The group decided to begin with individual interviews of 40 peers. The interview data was then used to articulate qualities of good schools, which would then be used to design a questionnaire to collect more data from a large sample of their peers. Utilizing their cultural intuition<sup>3</sup>, the youth researchers initially articulated characteristics of quality educational experiences to compose the questions for the interviews. They discussed what they considered to be the most important dimensions of the schooling experience, and created an interview protocol to allow interviewees to explore and share their ideas on school conditions and

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<sup>3</sup> Defined by Delgado Bernal (1998), the concept of cultural intuition extends Strauss and Corbin's notion of theoretical sensitivity, which consists of one's personal experience, existing literature, one's professional experience, and the research process, to include collective community experiences and memory.

experiences. After finalizing the interview protocol, youth researchers recruited and interviewed peers from their community with experiences in local charter and traditional high schools. Interviews were conducted between August and November 2010. We then reviewed the interview data to generate conceptual categories of educational experiences and concerns, using a grounded theory strategy (Glaser, 2002).

Next, we used the thematic findings from the interview analysis to engage more members of the local community in a dialogue to further clarify concerns and interests that shape the community's definition of quality schooling. Two youth forums were held in the Versailles neighborhood to facilitate conversations about the issues emerging from the interviews. We also held a dinner forum with students from LatiNola, a Latino youth group, to discuss issues related to language access and the treatment of immigrants in schools. Following these forums, we held two English-Vietnamese bilingual forums for parents in the mostly Vietnamese and African American community to hear about their experiences navigating and participating in their children's education. The forums were held at the local Vietnamese church, the cultural core of the Versailles community. This community dialogue process was an important and inclusive means to refine how the diverse residents of Versailles articulate and define their educational interests and the elements of a quality education.

Together, we reviewed all of the data collected through interviews and community forums to identify the characteristics of a good school and the educational interests and concerns articulated throughout the community-based process. Using this community-based and grounded theory process of data analysis, we arrived at a list of twelve critical dimensions of quality education to guide the development of a questionnaire. The twelve dimensions of schooling that the RYHC identified as integral to a quality education were quality teaching, adequate and responsive student support services, a positive school environment, safe schools, access to textbooks, healthy school food, family inclusion, academic rigor and college readiness, adequate English language learner curriculum and services, affordability in school fees, equitable participation in school choice process, and access to school transportation.

Using these dimensions, which significantly deviate from state test-based accountability models, we constructed a comprehensive survey and collected 411 surveys from youth enrolled in six New Orleans high schools from both the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the post-Katrina state-created Recovery School District (RSD). The youth researchers selected four high schools – Benjamin Franklin High School (OPSB chartered, selective admissions), McMain High School (OPSB operated), Sarah T. Reed High School (RSD operated), and Abramson Science and Technology Charter School (RSD chartered) – at which to administer the survey because many youth from the Versailles community attended these schools. RYHC student

leaders recruited over 20 volunteers to help administer the survey at these four schools. Prior to the survey collection phase, adult supporters trained each student representative in survey distribution techniques, and instructed them on how to approach fellow students in a randomized manner. Relationships with teachers at Priestley High School (OPSB chartered) and L.B. Landry High School (RSD operated) led to the inclusion of these two additional schools in the distribution of surveys, which were administered and collected by RYHC team members.

Table 1 summarizes the enrollment demographics of each of the six high schools in the 2010-2011 school year. Reduced and free lunch was utilized in this study as a proxy to indicate low-income status among respondents.

High School	Enrollment	%Asian	%Black	%Latino	%White	%Reduced/Free Lunch
Abramson	180	6.1%	91.0%	2.9%	0.0%	95.4%
Franklin	647	22.6%	29.7%	3.1%	41.4%	28.6%
Landry	528	0.2%	97.9%	0.2%	1.0%	100.0%
McMain	646	15.3%	81.6%	2.9%	0.2%	78.0%
Reed	513	5.3%	91.8%	2.5%	0.7%	100.0%
Priestley	247	0.0%	98.4%	0.4%	1.2%	78.5%

Data source: Louisiana Department of Education

Table 2 provides self-identified characteristics of the survey sample (n=411). It is important to point out that survey respondents were allowed to identify their racial identity and their reduced and free lunch status. This might explain why five survey respondents at Abramson identified as White even though the Department of Education data (table 1) indicates that no White students were enrolled in the school.

High School	Sample Size(n)	%Asian	%Black	%Latino	%White	%Reduced/Free Lunch
Abramson	37	32.4%	51.4%	0.0%	13.5%	91.4%
Franklin	70	55.7%	18.6%	1.4%	22.9%	25.7%
Landry	56	0.0%	96.4%	1.8%	0.0%	95.2%
McMain	125	49.6%	46.4%	3.2%	0.0%	76.3%
Reed	85	25.9%	68.2%	5.9%	0.0%	96.2%
Priestley	38	2.6%	89.5%	0.0%	5.3%	93.5%
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>33.1%</b>	<b>57.7%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>5.6%</b>	<b>77.3%</b>

Overall, the RYHC survey sample was not racially representative of the six schools' state-reported enrollment demographics. Asian American students at every school, with the exception of Landry, were oversampled. However, given the nature of VAYLA as the only Asian American youth organization in New Orleans and that Asian American students are often left out of research related to race and education (Ng, Pak, & Lee, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007), the overrepresentation of Asian American students in this survey can serve to provide information on an understudied population in urban education.

## **Results**

The dominant narrative produced by post-Katrina neoliberal policy advocates is a rosy one, arguing the effectiveness of post-Katrina reforms to alleviate the city's educational inequities. However, we found persistent, systemic disparities in the quality of education on the basis of school, race, income, geography, and language. According to student perspectives, represented in the collected data, significant problems remain in the radically transformed school system. Five of the six schools in the study were found to consistently underperform, as determined by survey results evaluating the schools along the community-defined twelve dimensions of school quality. For the purposes of this article, we will briefly review and discuss findings related to eight facets of a quality school experience: teaching, student support services, school environments, access to textbooks, family inclusion in school involvement, academic rigor and college readiness, affordability of school fees, and participation in the city's school choice system. Overall, the disparities presented, by school, race, and language, suggest that access to quality education is a privilege enjoyed only by those who are able to gain entry into specific schools within the New Orleans system – portraying a picture of systemic inequalities that is a far cry from a “miracle.”

### **Teaching**

VAYLA youth scholars chose to evaluate teachers, because they recognized the impact teachers can have on student learning and the overall schooling experience. Students gave mixed evaluations of their teachers (table 3). Survey ratings indicated that students gave relatively positive marks to their teachers for being prepared for their classes, with students at Benjamin Franklin High School (Ben) giving their teachers the highest mark (4.46). The majority of survey respondents reported that their teachers are “prepared” or “very prepared” for class each day. This finding directly countered narratives of “bad teachers,” who are not invested in teaching, often found in education debates (Kumashiro, 2012).

<b>Table 3: Evaluation of Teachers</b>						
<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
How prepared are your teachers? (1=not prepared; 5=very prepared)	3.78	4.46	3.98	3.45	3.97	3.52
How well do your teachers manage the classroom? (1=not well; 5=very well)	2.61	4.09	2.87	3.05	2.66	2.69
On average, how engaging are your teachers in their lessons? (1=not engaging; 5=very engaging)	2.61	3.36	2.76	2.67	3.11	2.73
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
How prepared are your teachers? (1=not prepared; 5=very prepared)	3.81	3.76	3.64	4.13		
How well do your teachers manage the classroom? (1=not well; 5=very well)	3.22	2.94	2.86	3.39		
On average, how engaging are your teachers in their lessons? (1=not engaging; 5=very engaging)	2.84	2.86	2.36	3.05		

However, students' evaluations of teachers' classroom management skills and level of engagement in lessons were lower. These results may be related to the New Orleans system's high reliance on new and temporary teachers through programs like Teach for America (Buras, 2011). As a frustrated 11<sup>th</sup> grader stated in an interview,

They are all new teachers; have no experience with teaching. They just sit there, and tell us what to do, tell us to read out of the book. They don't go through the problems with us or try to help us figure out how to get the answers.

### **Adequate and Responsive Student Support Services**

During one interview, a student shared,

Every time I go to the counselor, they say come back during lunch. And when you go there for lunch, they aren't there, because they are out for lunch. So, basically, you can't see them. At least make the school hire a counselor who's actually there for the students.

Recognizing the important and supportive role counselors have in academic decisions, college preparation, planning for life after high school, and in confronting social and emotional challenges, we included measurements of high school counseling. The provision of these services is even more pressing in the wake of catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, when many students needed additional support.

Table 4 summarizes some of the findings on student experiences with school counselors. According to survey data, students found counselors at Reed High School to be the least available to students, and also the least helpful. Students at Franklin High School rated their counselors the highest on availability, helpfulness, and comfort level. Examining the results through an ethnic/racial lens, Latino students found their school counselors to be the least available and to be the least helpful relative to other students' ratings. Latino and Asian American students also reported the lowest levels of comfort in visiting a counselor, with weighted mean ratings of 2.21 and 2.26 on a 5-point scale, respectively.

**Table 4: Student Support Services**

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
How available are your counselors? (1=unavailable; 5=available)	3.11	4.21	3.71	3.12	3.23	2.75
How helpful are your counselors in supporting your progress? (1=not helpful; 5=very helpful)	3.58	4.45	4.1	3.19	3.5	3.07
How comfortable are you turning to your high school counselors with an emotional or social problem? (1=uncomfortable; 5=comfortable)	2.57	3.03	2.89	2.1	2.14	2.48
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
How available are your counselors? (1=unavailable; 5=available)	3.28	3.3	2.93	4.0		
How helpful are your counselors in supporting your progress? (1=not helpful; 5=very helpful)	3.43	3.62	2.5	4.26		
How comfortable are you turning to your high school counselors with an emotional or social problem? (1=uncomfortable; 5=comfortable)	2.26	2.54	2.21	3.26		

### School Environment

The cleanliness and safety of the school environment, including racial or ethnic harassment, were two key concerns that arose from interviews and included in the survey design. Sharing a particularly frightening experience at her high school, one student said,

There's big hole in the ceiling of the auditorium. And it's so dirty in there. Sometimes a rat will run by, and the kids will start screaming and running around. Why can't you get

that under control? I know things aren't perfect, but a rat shouldn't be coming at a student!

Other students shared examples of racial conflicts and school staff neglecting to confront incidents. One Asian American student interviewee shared, "I was translating for an ESL student who doesn't speak English, and these two dudes came up to me; kept screaming 'Gook!' in my face. I looked over and the teacher was just sitting there; did absolutely nothing."

Table 5 summarizes the survey findings related to school cleanliness and safety. Benjamin Franklin High School came out on top for cleanliness and safety. However, it was the second most likely school in the study to have students report being harassed or attacked for their race or ethnicity (11.3%). Reed High School had the most students identifying as having been racially or ethnically harassed in school (16%). Disaggregated by race, White students found their schools to be the cleanest (3.61) and the safest (4.26). Relative to other students, Latino students reported attending the least clean (2.21) and least safe (2.64) schools. They were also the most likely to report experiencing ethnic harassment (21.4%). Asian Americans also reported a relatively high level of experiencing racial harassment (12.6%).

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
Rate the cleanliness of your school. (1=poor; 5=excellent)	2.72	3.77	3.62	2.07	3.71	2.4
How safe do you feel at your school? (1=unsafe; 5=very safe)	3.4	4.6	3.4	3.1	3.1	2.5
Have you ever been harassed or attacked at school because of your race/ethnicity? (% answering "yes")	5.6%	11.3%	2.0%	8.9%	2.8%	16.0%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
Rate the cleanliness of your school. (1=poor; 5=excellent)	2.65	2.9	2.21	3.61		
How safe do you feel at your school? (1=unsafe; 5=very safe)	3.35	3.19	2.64	4.26		
Have you ever been harassed or attacked at school because of your race/ethnicity? (% answering "yes")	12.6%	5.4%	21.4%	8.7%		

## Access to Textbooks

During one of her first visits to VAYLA, the first author was struck by the fact that some schools in New Orleans do not provide students with enough books. Her field notes stated,

Not all schools have enough books for all students! One girl told me that teachers will often take the last 10 or 15 minutes having students crowd around the available books to copy down homework problems and assignments. That's lost instruction time, not to mention the lack of basic resources for a basic education.

In an interview, a student explained,

There are some classrooms where you do have books. Where you can take them home, and use them for homework, or to catch-up. But not all classes are like that. I don't know the reason why we can't get the things we need. All I know is we don't have it.

However, as table 6 demonstrates, the lack of books is not a reality for all students. None of the survey respondents from Benjamin Franklin High School answered "rarely" or "never" when asked, "Do your classes have enough textbooks for all students?" Additionally, while only 8.7% of White respondents reported never or rarely having enough books to go around to students in their classes, 32.7% of African Americans, 27.3% of Latinos, and 12.7% of Asian Americans surveyed indicated that there were never or rarely enough books in their classes for all students to use in class.

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
Do your classes have enough textbooks for all students? (% answering "rarely" or "never")	18.9%	0.0%	25%	38.5%	50%	38.5%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
Do your classes have enough textbooks for all students? (% answering "rarely" or "never")	12.7%	32.7%	27.3%	8.7%		

**Family Inclusion**

The RYHC team chose family inclusion as an important dimension because the youth value their families' involvement as a factor in their academic achievement. Family members, especially parents, also play important roles as advocates for the quality of their children's education (Jeynes, 2007). Parents may recognize their important role in their children's education, but feel stymied from fully participating in the education process due to language barriers. As one mother stated,

I know my son is having some problems academically. I've been there for parent-teacher conferences. The teachers say they are trying their best to help my son, but I feel that it's my fault. If the meetings were in Vietnamese, I would be able to understand more. I would be able to figure out what's wrong.

Survey results on parental involvement in schools, summarized in table 7, indicate disparities in the level of parental involvement by school, limited English proficiency (LEP) status of guardians, and by race and ethnicity. Students at McMinn High School, relative to others, were the most likely to report that their guardians never visited their school (36.8%). Nearly a third (32.5%) of Reed students reported that their guardians never visited the school. When examining the survey results by race, we found that Asian American (48.9%) and Latino students (42.9%) were the most likely to reveal that their guardians had never visited their schools, which are more than double the statistic for African American students (21.3%). Meanwhile, only 9.1 percent of White students indicated that their guardians had never visited their schools. Moreover, around two-thirds and up to three-quarters of students with LEP status parents at Abramson (66.7%), Franklin (66.7%), McMinn (63.8%), and Reed (75.6%) high schools reported that their parents had never visited their schools.

**Table 7: Family Inclusion**

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
%whose parents have never visited their schools.	25.7%	28.2%	18.4%	36.8%	30.6%	32.5%
%with LEP parents who have never visited their schools.	66.7%	66.7%	N/A	63.8%	N/A	75.6%
%with LEP parents who never receive linguistically appropriate forms/information.	20.0%	61.5%	N/A	45.1%	N/A	18.8%
%with LEP parents who report no school staff who can speak guardians' native language.	18.8%	64.3%	N/A	78.8%	N/A	13.6%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
%whose parents have never visited their schools.	48.9%	21.3%	42.9%	9.1%		

Although these data might suggest that Asian American and Latino parents are not engaged in their children's education, our survey findings also point to institutional barriers that may prevent these parents from being involved in their children's schools. As table 7 indicates, students with LEP status parents reported limited access to linguistically appropriate school documents and bilingual school staff. At Benjamin Franklin High School, 61.5% of the survey respondents reported never receiving linguistically appropriate documents, and 64.3% reported not having bilingual staff at school who can communicate with their parents. At McMMain High School, 78.8% of the respondents pointed to an absence of bilingual school staff who can communicate with their parents.

### **Academic Rigor and College Readiness**

In interviews, some students reported feeling unprepared for college, and several high school alumni shared stories of struggling through remedial math and writing classes at the University of New Orleans. A salutatorian from one of the high schools stated,

I'm worried about going to college and not knowing anything. In [high school], they say I'm super smart, but I know. I don't understand a lot. I am really bad in English, yet they

still give me an “A” in English. I’m scared to go to college and not know anything, and flunking out.

Based on these testimonies, our group was concerned with the issue of academic rigor, access to college preparatory curriculum, and overall preparation to success in higher education.

Survey results related to academic rigor, college readiness and preparation are provided in table 8. Students at Benjamin Franklin High School feel that their school is preparing them very well for college with a rating of 4.69 out of 5. Students at other schools, especially Abramson (2.73) and Reed (2.86) high schools are not as confident that they are being prepared for college. Also, Asian American, Black, and Latino students gave lower ratings than their White counterparts in how well their high schools were preparing them for college, which may be a result of racial disparities in access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

**Table 8: Academic Rigor and College Readiness**

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
How well is your high school preparing you for college? (1=not well; 5=very well)	2.73	4.69	3.59	3.12	3.0	2.86
% reporting less ≤ 1 hour of homework per night, on average.	70.2%	15.5%	62.1%	57.1%	65.8%	62.3%
% taken/enrolled in AP classes	16.7%	68.1%	30.8%	9.7%	20.6%	17.9%
% not taking AP classes due to lack of classes or other barriers	36.8%	0.0%	80.0%	61.4%	84.2%	49.0%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
How well is your high school preparing you for college? (1=not well; 5=very well)	3.28	3.29	3.14	4.24		
% reporting less ≤ 1 hour of homework per night, on average.	45.6%	61.3%	50.0%	30.4%		
% taken/enrolled in AP classes	29.0%	21.3%	33.3%	50.0%		
% not taking AP classes due to lack of classes or other barriers	57.4%	58.7%	37.5%	11.1%		

Half of the White students in the survey reported having taken at least one AP class, but only a third of Latino students and less than a third of Asian American (29%) and Black (21.3%) students had taken AP classes. The majority (68.1%) of respondents from Franklin High School benefited from AP classes. The high level of AP course enrollment at Franklin starkly contrasted with student participation in AP classes at the other high schools. Large proportions of students at the other high schools indicated that they faced significant barriers to enrolling in the college preparatory classes; either their school did not offer AP classes or they were not allowed to enroll in the classes. The majority of Asian American (57.4%) and African American (58.7%) students reported facing barriers to enrolling in AP classes, while only 11.1 percent of White students experienced barriers to such courses.

Additionally at Franklin High School, only 15.5% of respondents indicated having an average of an hour or less of homework per night, while the majority of students at the other high schools reported having an hour or less of homework on an average night. According to Cooper (2007), educators generally agree that high school students should be assigned 1.5 to 2 hours of homework per night. Only Benjamin Franklin High School met this guideline for academic rigor.

### **Affordability in School Fees**

During a visit to VAYLA, the first author asked a group of RYHC members, “How have things changed at your school now that it’s a charter school?” An 11-year old member responded, “The only thing different is that my mom had to take another job to make sure we could afford the high school fees, like for the uniform.” From uniforms and school trips, to special classes and transportation, VAYLA youth members talked about how their families spent hundreds of dollars on fees each year to go to publicly funded schools. As one student shared in an interview,

All the students were upset about uniforms, but they said it’s up to the school board. I spent \$100 on the shirt, the pants, and the tie. You have to buy the blazer and the cardigan too, for when it’s cold. I didn’t buy that stuff. My brother only had enough money for the basics. When you tell the school you can’t afford the uniform, they tell you “just buy the basics.” The crazy thing is that they still give you a citation if you wear your own sweatshirt.

Concerned about unmonitored, rising costs of charter school fees, and the implicitly discriminatory effect these expenses may have on low-income students, the RYHC team

included questions about school fees and affordability in the survey design. Overall, results from the survey, displayed in table 9, suggested that many students are facing difficulties paying for school fees, with a majority of students at Reed (60%) and Priestley (52.6%) reporting difficulties in paying for fees. Asian American students were the most likely to report facing difficulties affording fees (41.9%), followed by African American students (38.2%), and Latinos (35.7%). A much smaller portion of White survey respondents (17.4%) reported financial challenges. Of the students reporting financial challenges, nearly half of the non-White students identify uniform costs as the most pressing, while none of the White students reported uniform fees as a key concern.

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
% reporting difficulties affording various school fees	16.2%	25.4%	17.2%	42.9%	52.6%	60.0%
% school uniform fees are a key concern	2.7%	1.4%	5.7%	20.0%	26.3%	39.3%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
% reporting difficulties affording various school fees	41.9%	38.2%	35.7%	17.4%		
% school uniform fees are a key concern	49.1%	45.1%	40.0%	0.0%		

### **Equitable Participation in the School Choice Process**

With the free-market principled school choice system, students are now theoretically allowed to choose from public schools across the whole city. Yet, we found that many students did not feel they were attending the school of their choice, and others did not know they had a choice in schools. As one high school student stated,

My parents didn't know there were 20 high schools I could go to. My family knew of three or four. My mom and my sisters tried to find a school for me, but I wish they had sent a little packet on the schools—actually, I'd want two packets: one in English, and the other in Vietnamese, for my mom to see.

Acknowledging limited knowledge in the community about the school choice system, we included survey questions to find out more about informed participation in the system. To measure a student's access to school choices, we used two indicators: whether a student is attending the school of their choice, and whether a student felt their family had adequate knowledge of school options.

Survey findings, presented in table 10, suggested that the school choice system was not working well for many, and that disparities and barriers to participation existed by high school, parental LEP status, and geography. At Abramson, Landry, Priestley, and Reed high schools, only 41.97%, 44.2%, 37.9%, and 51.9% respectively reported attending their first choice school. Additionally, only 53.8% of Latinos and 57.6% of African Americans were attending their first choice schools compared to 67.4% of Asian Americans and 82.6% of White students in the study.

<i>By High School</i>	Abramson	Ben	Landry	McMain	Priestley	Reed
% attending 1st choice high school	41.7%	97.2%	44.2%	67.5%	37.9%	51.9%
<i>By Respondent Race</i>	Asian	Black	Latino	White		
% attending 1st choice high school	67.4%	57.6%	53.8%	82.6%		

Based on survey data, we also found that the likelihood of a student attending his or her first choice school might be a consequence of parental knowledge about the school choice system, as shown in table 11. Generally, students not attending their first choice schools rated their parents' knowledge about the school choice system lower than students attending their first choice schools, with the exception of students from middle class families whose parents were rated similarly in knowledge levels.

**Table 11: Parental Knowledge of School Choice System**

<i>By Class, LEP status, and Race</i>	Students attending 1st choice school	Students <u>not</u> attending 1st choice school
Low Income	3.31	3.11
Middle Class	3.78	3.79
LEP status Parents	3.18	2.63
English proficient Parents	3.53	3.41
Asian American	3.19	2.8
African American	3.53	3.47
Latino	3.0	2.5
White	4.3	4.25

Finally, we found that a barrier to all families in the school choice system was a lack of transportation. A large majority (74.2%) of students not attending their first choice high school reported that the lack of transportation was the key reason. The Versailles neighborhood, where VAYLA is located, is about 30 miles from where many high schools are placed. Without realistic transportation options, many schools are inaccessible for students who are unable to secure private means of transportation, leading to barriers based on economic status and geographic location. Transportation barriers are especially difficult for families in the Lower 9th Ward and New Orleans East, both sections of the city that are characterized by geographic marginalization and a dearth of high performing public schools. In these neighborhoods, the provision of efficient, reliable transportation can mean the difference between a student having access to a high performing school, or being locked into a low performing one.

### **Implications**

While our sample only covered six public, charter and traditional high schools, a picture emerged of a highly unequal school system by race, class, LEP status, and geography. The city's premier high school, Benjamin Franklin, with a higher proportion of White student enrollment and a significantly lower proportion of students on free or reduced lunch, fared much better in the RYHC student evaluation than other schools such as Sarah T. Reed. In addition to considerable performance gaps, these schools have equally large opportunity gaps contributing to what Ladson-Billings (2006) calls an educational debt.

The evaluation of schools conducted by VAYLA's RYHC team found that overall, the quality of provision is inadequate from the perspective of those who matter most: the students. Other than Benjamin Franklin High School, the other five schools, which have enrollments that are nearly 100% students of color, consistently underperformed when measured against the standards that RYHC youth scholars believe constitute a holistic, quality education. Equality of opportunity in New Orleans' decentralized model is not being realized when such large disparities in access to quality teaching, counseling, textbooks, and positive school environments can be tracked along racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic lines.

Given that the New Orleans system of schools is quickly being ordained a vanguard urban education model by the nation's most powerful institutional structures, this study pleads for caution, empiricism, and rationality from a set of business-oriented reformers who lay claim to these attributes, yet move ahead with religious zeal. We hope scholars, activists, and policymakers who look to New Orleans for future policy prescriptions will listen to the perspectives of over 400 New Orleans students represented in this study, and youth who seek to participate as engaged citizens in the debates and decision-making processes. It is imperative that youth are included as key stakeholders in the education discourse, and this project has shown that urban youth are more than capable of contributing and taking part in these important discussions about their futures. Their participation can provide guidance for future research and policymaking for social justice in education.

As a project led by an Asian American youth organization, the YPAR study also demonstrated the importance of including Asian American communities in education reform debates. The findings of this study indicated that Asian American students shared similar educational interests and barriers as their African American and Latino peers, within a specific local school system. Moreover, according to 2007-2008 data from the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics, over 40% of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) K-12 students receive their education from urban schools. With sizeable enrollments in some urban school districts, future studies on race and urban education should consider including AAPI community and student interests.

Ultimately, this study demonstrated that YPAR and youth activism can be effective and inclusive democratic interventions for holding school privatization movement leaders more accountable to community interests. They are also vital, action research approaches that can improve knowledge on educational contexts affecting young people through their perspectives and leadership. It would be interesting to implement similar YPAR projects in other cities that are undergoing similar reforms. Parallel studies could evaluate the effectiveness of youth action research and activism projects at challenging anti-democratic school reform efforts.

Armed with this study's findings, VAYLA has already won several educational equity campaign victories. To improve LEP family engagement in local schools, the New Orleans Parent Organizing Network has agreed to publish its annual *New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools* in both Vietnamese and Spanish. The RSD has also hired bilingual staff at their parent centers. Most significantly, RSD has agreed to allow VAYLA and another local youth organization to complete a comprehensive youth-led evaluation of all RSD schools in the 2012-2013 school year, the results of which should be used to guide future improvements in the school system. RSD has agreed to ensure and provide the youth evaluation leaders access to all school sites for data collection, and to support fundraising for the effort. It remains to be seen whether the working relationship formed between the RSD and VAYLA will actually result in a genuine and equitable level of participation in New Orleans school policymaking processes by local youth and communities. It is, however, clear that the RYHC youth scholars effectively engaged in a social justice praxis to develop and accumulate community capital (Ginwright et al., 2005), that empowered them to challenge the master narrative of a charter school "miracle," holding neoliberal education entrepreneurs accountable to community-based interests.

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