

Learning from Catastrophe Theory

What New Orleans Tells Us about Our Education Future

Did Katrina blow away a city's educational cobwebs? Will New Orleans enjoy a school renaissance? Can catastrophe theory explain the properties of school reform as well as the dynamics of physical systems?

In this issue's cover story, Veronique de Rugy and Kathryn Newmark say it's too early to know whether a catastrophe has swept away one of the country's most corrupt and ineffectual school systems, replacing it with a network of competing, privately managed charter schools. But after the wind, rain, and waters of Hurricane Katrina had subsided, only the city's private and charter schools had the wherewithal to reopen in a timely fashion.

Most public schools were bogged down in mud and wreckage that was as much political as physical. By June 2006, only 12,000 of the 65,000 public school students had returned to school. And most of them were going to the five pre-existing charter schools—or to the 13 new ones formed in the wake of the disaster. Meanwhile, 20,000 of the 26,000 students in private schools were back in class.

Is New Orleans a metaphor for what could happen to the American public-school system nationally? Can a new birth be borne of catastrophe?

It does not take a confirmed curmudgeon to dismiss such notions. Political change in the United States occurs incrementally, a tiny step at a time. One should not expect much more than a haphazard accountability system, some boutique charter schools, a few scattered virtual schools, and perhaps a tiny voucher program.

The forces of the status quo are deeply entrenched. Teacher unions, school board associations, schools of education, state departments of education, and the halls of Congress all resist fundamental change. The American public, though uneasy about the current state of the country's schools, is not yet aroused to the point where it is willing to sweep aside institutionalized barriers to reform.

Even when school reformers seem to gain a beachhead, the complexities of the American governmental system, with its

endless veto points, slow reform's expansion. Too often what is won in one legislative chamber dies in another, or is vetoed by the governor, or is found unconstitutional by politicized judges. And any reforms that survive the political gantlet can still end up choking on administrative dust.

With school systems stagnant, high-school students graduate without learning any more today than they did two generations ago. According to the "nation's report card," the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), high-school reading and math scores have hardly budged in 35 years. In science, student scores are actually falling, this despite the incredible rate of scientific discovery in our lifetime.

Yet in a world of rapid technological change, schools that cannot teach science may be no more in equilibrium than an upturned house balanced on its peak. Systems that appear to be impervious to external shock can nonetheless be quickly transmogrified. The Soviet Union, even more bureaucratized than American public schools, collapsed in a week.

Within the United States, a phoenix has more than once risen from the ashes. Out of the Chicago fire and the San Francisco earthquake came new urban designs and architectural forms that brought forth the great cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Out of the riots of the 1960s appeared an awakening that built the foundations for a multiracial society. Today, an oil spike, coupled with rising oceans and powerful storms, is creating a bipartisan, pro-conservation consensus on energy policy. In each case, advances came at the expense of vested interests that had long exercised with near monopoly power.

Will New Orleans finally get a viable school system? Is it a harbinger for what could happen nationwide? Reformers should take heart—but be wary nonetheless. Those beholden to powerful interests will try to eclipse the sun and forestall the dawn. They know what's at stake—and they read catastrophe theory, too.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
