

## **New Orleans Public Schools History: A Brief Overview**

### **The first New Orleans public schools were founded in the 1840s.**

James Baldwin, a New Orleans official and early advocate for free public schools, was influenced by the work of Horace Mann, the first Massachusetts state secretary of education and a pioneer of American public education. The first New Orleans public school opened in January 1842 on Julia Street between Magazine and Tchoupitoulas. Baldwin helped recruit a Boston native and friend of Horace Mann, John Angier Shaw, to be the first school superintendent for the city's 2<sup>nd</sup> municipality, an area encompassing the American sector upriver from the French Quarter. The city's municipalities maintained their own separate public school systems until the Civil War.

Prior to the Civil War, a number of divisions within the population led to political conflicts over public education. French Creoles wanted to maintain a separate system of French language schools. In the Creole-dominated first municipality, which included the French Quarter, over half of students spoke French as a first language in 1852. Newer Catholic and Jewish immigrants, who arrived in large numbers in the 1840s and 1850s, objected to the use of Protestant prayers in the American sector's public schools. In contrast with other ethnic groups, New Orleans' free blacks, who numbered 11,000 in 1860, were denied access to public education along with the city's 14,000 slaves.

### **The Civil War and Reconstruction brought new opportunities for education to black New Orleanians.**

New Orleans surrendered to Union troops in 1862 and was spared the destruction meted out on other Southern cities later in the war. Union troops encouraged the public schools to reopen but also created a school system for freed slaves. For two years following the Civil War, separate public schools for whites and blacks were run in parallel. In 1868, a new state constitutional convention dominated by newly enfranchised blacks and white Republicans adopted a constitution that required schools to be established on a common basis without segregation by race.

Though there was initial resistance to school integration in New Orleans, a number of schools did eventually operate smoothly as integrated institutions in the years 1871-74. A detailed study of the period estimated that 500-1000 black students and several thousand white students were enrolled in 19 mixed race schools in the spring of 1874. A number of new private schools were also established during the period to take in white students whose parents would not send their children to integrated schools. Continued resistance to integration, combined with political resistance to Republican rule, led to the formation of white supremacist organizations opposed to school integration. An attempt to integrate the all-white Upper Girls High School in 1874 led to white mob violence at the school. Vigilante groups then began to forcibly eject black students from integrated schools and street clashes between whites and blacks ensued. Though the number of

black children attending integrated schools declined after the violence of 1874, there were still 300 black students attending mixed race schools in 1877. When Union troops were pulled out of Louisiana in 1877 schools were resegregated along racial lines.

**After Reconstruction, separate and unequal was the norm for New Orleans schools.** Following Reconstruction, New Orleans' population and school enrollment continued to grow. In the 1870s and 1880s, funds from the estate of John McDonogh, a wealthy trader and slaveholder, began to be used to construct new schools. These schools were predominantly for white students, whose enrollment numbers almost doubled in the three decades from 1878 to 1910. In the same period, black enrollment remained flat; black students were routinely restricted to lower grades and had no access to high school. Another spurt of building occurred between 1910 and 1940 and beginning in 1910, black enrollment started to increase dramatically. McDonogh #35, the first black high school in New Orleans, was opened in 1917 after black citizens' groups put significant pressure on the school board (it remained the only black high school until Booker T. Washington opened in 1942). From 1910 to 1940, black enrollment more than quadrupled while white enrollment increased by 50 percent.

From the end of Reconstruction two separate school systems emerged for white and black students: while white schools were more numerous, better financed, and kept in better condition, black schools languished with fewer resources and overcrowded classrooms. Figures from state reports in the 1930s make the differences explicit:

1939-1940 Average state expenditure on education per child:  
\$62.99 per white child  
\$17.17 per black child

1937-1938 Average annual salary paid to Louisiana teachers:  
\$1,193 for white teachers  
\$504 for black teachers

1937-1938 Average number of students enrolled per teacher in Louisiana:  
White schools: 27.5  
Black schools: 41.8

1939-1940 Value of school plant in Orleans Parish per pupil:  
White schools: \$297 per pupil  
Black schools: \$78 per pupil

Parallel school systems also led to the inefficient use of school buildings. Maps from the 1930s show how school areas overlap between white and black schools. Figures from the time document that while black schools were routinely overcrowded, many white schools had extra capacity. In an area where one school could have been built to serve black and

white children together, a small, overcrowded black school and an underutilized white school often existed in close proximity.

**While the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision took away legal protection for segregated schools, New Orleans public education only desegregated after a decade of legal wrangling and social upheaval.**

The Louisiana legislature quickly reacted to the 1954 *Brown* decision with several bills intended to keep public schools segregated. At the same time, A.P. Tureaud, a prominent civil rights lawyer, filed a suit against the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) intended to desegregate the city's schools based on the *Brown* decision. In 1956, a panel of federal judges ruled the legislature's segregation bills unconstitutional and federal Judge Skelly Wright overturned the School Board's segregation policy. In reaction, the legislature tried to find new legislative means to continue school segregation. Across the state, White Citizen Councils formed to support segregation in the face of court-mandated desegregation. Few white moderates in New Orleans raised their voices in the late 1950s to call for school desegregation and the school board remained adamantly opposed.

Once the OPSB's appeals were exhausted, Judge Wright prepared to rule on the process for desegregating schools in 1960. In that year, the school board mailed out a survey to parents to determine if there was support for closing schools in the event of court-mandated desegregation. When the surveys were returned, there was a slight majority for keeping schools open. Lloyd Rittener, the school board president, announced he would disregard the survey because most of the parents voting to keep schools open were black and "whites are the people who support the system." When Judge Wright ruled in May 1960 that the schools would have to desegregate at a rate of one grade per year, the OPSB called on the legislature to stop the ruling. In the summer of 1960, the legislature passed a bill giving the governor control of any school district under court order to desegregate. Governor Davis took control of New Orleans schools and ordered them to open on September 7, 1960 on a segregated basis. Federal judges quickly overruled the new laws and returned authority back to the school board. The OPSB then decided to accept applications for individual school transfers, finally winnowing 137 applications for black students to attend white schools down to 4. On November 14, 1960, four black girls protected by police and federal marshals walked past shouting mobs and integrated the first white schools since Reconstruction.

Integration precipitated a partial boycott by white students at Frantz and McDonogh 19, the first schools to be integrated. However, overall white enrollment did not decline significantly in the first years of desegregation. The pace of desegregation under the school board's plan was also very slow. By 1964-65, only 873 black students attended desegregated schools in what was now a majority black school system with over 100,000 students. Angered by the slow pace of desegregation, the NAACP went back to the courts to challenge the school board's desegregation process. A federal judge ordered a speeded up process that officially desegregated schools through the twelfth grade by the 1969-70 school year.

**In the era of desegregation, New Orleans public schools have faced the same problems affecting many urban school districts: white and middle-class flight, a predominantly high-needs population of students, and decreasing public investment in education.**

While the process of desegregation is often associated with white flight to private schools or suburban districts, white enrollment only dipped slightly during the period of desegregation from 1960-69. However, in the following decade of 1970-1979, white enrollment in New Orleans public schools fell by over half. In the same period black enrollment rose slightly, but then also began a long period of steady decline. While in 1960-61 blacks made up 58 percent of the student population, by 1980-81 black enrollment represented 84 percent of public school students. By the 2004-05 school year before Hurricane Katrina, 94 percent of New Orleans public school students were black.

Whites and upper and middle-class blacks abandoned the school system as conditions worsened. As a result, the school population became disproportionately poor and at-risk. This situation was reflected in school test scores, which ranked Orleans Parish 67<sup>th</sup> out of 68 Louisiana parishes for student achievement in 2005. Governance problems and high turnover also plagued the school system; between 1998 and 2005 the school system had eight superintendents. Financial mismanagement led to FBI investigations, criminal indictments, and a school system debt burden of \$265 million by 2005. In the midst of leadership crises and financial problems, school buildings were left to decay. With more school facilities built before 1950 than after, maintaining the physical condition of the buildings was a huge challenge. By 2005, many school buildings had severely deteriorated, suffering from years of neglect and deferred maintenance.

**Hurricane Katrina decimated the New Orleans public school system.**

When Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans in August 2005, it displaced 65,000 students and 7,500 school employees. Only 16 of 128 school buildings escaped relatively unscathed. Three months after the storm, the Louisiana Department of Education declared most public schools in New Orleans “failing”, and transferred them to the authority of the Recovery School District, a state-run entity charged with operating these schools.

Two years since Katrina, slightly more than half of students have returned; those who have are part of an entirely new system, characterized by autonomy, choice and multiple school operators. In the 2006-07 school year, two-thirds of the 58 schools reopened were charters; in all 23 different entities were running public schools in New Orleans. As a result, the current public education landscape seems complex and disconnected, and inequity in funding and resources is exacerbated by this complexity. Many schools still face enormous challenges with respect to funding, facilities, inexperienced leadership, and inadequate support from an insufficient number of district staff. Even so, innovative schools are creating new models for educating high-needs students. National attention is

focused on New Orleans schools, and a number of local and national organizations have stepped in to help open schools, recruit teachers, train staff, and provide other services. As a new public school system takes shape, some old patterns of inequity based on poverty and race have begun to reappear. It remains to be seen whether they will become institutionalized again, or whether the new system can radically change the historical patterns of public education in New Orleans.

**New Orleans Public School Enrollment**

