

**Whose City? Whose Schools?**  
**A case study of civic engagement and planning "from below"**  
**to promote educational equity in New Orleans public schools**

by

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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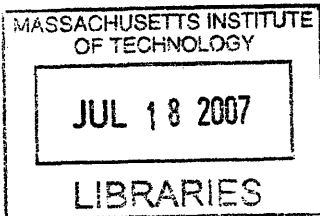
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**ABSTRACT**

How and why have ordinary citizens claimed their stake in the process of rebuilding public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, and what are the lessons for planning in post-disaster contexts? This paper investigates civic engagement that emerged “from below” in post-Katrina New Orleans through a case study of the Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association (DNIA) Education Committee. Civic engagement from below promotes the powerful idea that citizens can and should be agents of change within public decision-making, and not merely recipients of public services or providers of input in top-down approaches to reform.

The case of the DNIA Education Committee reveals three key lessons relevant to civic engagement after a disaster. First, opportunities for collaboration between government and community groups can be easily missed, especially when dynamics of mistrust and unequal power are unaddressed, unless each party believes it is possible and knows how to invent options for collaboration that address their different needs while meeting their shared goals. Second, after a disaster residents may find their very survival intrinsically connected to, and indeed dependent on, how public institutions and infrastructure are rebuilt. With a heightened sense of interconnectedness to their environment and awareness of government’s role to protect the common good, individuals beyond the “usual suspects” may seek out ways to become engaged in civic life. Finally, when citizens discover that their values are not incorporated into the “official” recovery and rebuilding plan, a political will to create an alternative plan may emerge. However, there is a challenge to transforming this plan from a broad and values-based plan into an actionable plan.

The thesis recommends several ways the DNIA Education Committee could enhance community capacity to shape a more equitable and effective system of public education in New Orleans: 1) translate the idea of “world-class, community-centered” education into a workable plan that policymakers and others can *make decisions about* and *compare* to their own plans, 2) build alliances with other organizations and actors in order to leverage vital resources and deepen impact, and 3) build capacity at the base to gain broader and more legitimate representation and promote social learning necessary to create an alternative plan.

Thesis Supervisor: Xavier de Souza Briggs  
Title: Associate Professor of Sociology and Urban Planning



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## Introduction

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“Let the people decide!” It is a powerful battlecry, particularly among those who have been historically marginalized from decision-making processes that impact their lives, implying that ordinary people *can* and *should* play a central role in deciding what is in their best interest, rather than assuming that politicians, policymakers, and planners should decide for them. Hurricane Katrina devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. New Orleans, Louisiana was the hardest hit city in terms of damage caused by flooding and winds and displacement of more than three-quarters of the population. In the aftermath of the storm, Mayor Ray Nagin initiated the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, an effort to integrate the knowledge of planning and policy experts into a rebuilding plan for the city. This plan, as well as an effort by the City Council to develop a city plan, failed to gain legitimacy from local leaders and residents, mainly because the plans were viewed as top-down initiatives that imposed a vision of the future onto those most directly affected by the storm and its aftermath. These failures in planning can be viewed as failures to understand the processes and outcomes of civic engagement. It was not until the third attempt to create a comprehensive planning process and plan for the city that civic engagement received the attention it deserved.

### *Civic engagement in post-Katrina New Orleans*

The Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), initiated by the Louisiana Recovery Authority, represents the city’s comprehensive planning process and plan, which was submitted to the City Planning Commission for approval on January 31, 2007. Through a series of high-tech town hall meetings that brought together up to 2500 residents of New Orleans and those displaced by the storm, UNOP designers crafted a process to engage ordinary citizens in deliberation and decision-making about how they wanted to their neighborhoods and city to be rebuilt. However, while the UNOP process has been credited for successfully bridging citizen engagement with planner expertise, bringing the diasporic communities into the process, and incorporating previously initiated and smaller plans into the larger unified plan (Williamson, 2007), it does not represent the only form of civic engagement that emerged in post-Katrina New Orleans relevant to rebuilding.

This paper investigates civic engagement that emerged “from below” in post-Katrina New Orleans. By civic engagement from below, I am referring to the various ways in which ordinary citizens choose to participate in public life, through formal institutions as well as through political advocacy and community organizing. I am also referring to those modes of engagement that are initiated by people themselves (“from below”) rather than by a public agency or someone in a position with formal decision-making power (“from above”). This type of civic engagement promotes the powerful idea that citizens can and should be agents of change within

public decision-making, and not merely as recipients of services or providers of input in top-down approaches to reform. In the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, and indeed most communities where power is unevenly distributed, the possible lessons to learn from the initiatives of the less powerful are often overlooked. It is my intention to bring some of these lessons to light for the benefit of urban planners and other city-level decision makers whose responsibility it is to create livable and democratic communities for all.

### *Learning about civic engagement through the context of public education*

Education has long been a focal point for community mobilization within different types of communities and yet traditional planning processes, which emphasize some form of citizen participation as a necessary component of decision-making, often overlook public education as a standard community development issue. Some of this can be explained by the way education policy, particularly urban school reform, has been created in isolation from housing or economic policy when in fact they are intrinsically connected. In recent years, education has moved to the forefront of mayoral agendas, bringing education and community development in closer alignment. This represents an opportunity for planners to focus on what they can learn from civic engagement in education that may reshape how they think about traditional planning processes. A key area to investigate will be how groups who have historically been left out of traditional planning processes, such as low-income communities, communities of color, and young people, have been engaged in public decision-making around education issues. If planners can determine how to translate the conditions that promote civic engagement in education by marginalized communities to other areas of community development, we will experience a richer, more diverse set of perspectives engaged in public life, ultimately strengthening the democracy in which we live.

### *Research question*

We know very little about what civic engagement in public education looks like after a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, which impacts all facets of public and private life in irrevocable ways. In the aftermath of the storm, with the city's political infrastructure broken and social networks disrupted, an "up for grabs" environment for planning and decision-making emerged. In this uncertain context, what do decision-makers and planners need to know to better understand the processes and outcomes of civic engagement? This broad *practical* question, coupled with the urgency to understand how the young people of New Orleans can immediately receive the high quality education they deserve, motivate this study.

My research is directed by the following *research* question: How and why have ordinary citizens claimed their stake in the process of rebuilding public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, and what are the lessons for planning in post-disaster contexts? To illuminate these issues, I address the following sub-questions:

- How did ordinary citizens' engagement in the rebuilding of public education evolve and how did they set their goals? What are the key processes they used to achieve their goals?

- How did ordinary citizens view their purpose and power within the context of the broader discourse on urban education reform?
- How does ordinary citizens' involvement in education advocacy relate to the challenge of increasing civic engagement in a post-disaster environment?

## **Methods**

This paper describes findings and analysis from a *revelatory* case study (Yin, 1994) of the Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association (DNIA) Education Committee. The DNIA Education Committee is one example of civic engagement in public education that emerged in the post-Katrina New Orleans environment. It has not been studied before and the impact of their work on the future of public education in New Orleans could be significant. There are a few aspects of the case that made it personally interesting to me. As a student whose interests intersect urban planning and education, the DNIA Education Committee's evolution from a subcommittee of an existing equity-oriented neighborhood improvement association into a virtually autonomous citywide initiative sounded like an interesting model of school-community collaboration, one that may advance possibilities of integrating education advocacy further into community development initiatives. In addition, I was interested in investigating a case that utilized both "inside" and "outside" strategies to effect change. The DNIA Education Committee's dual strategy of developing capacity through an institutional base (the high school in their neighborhood) as well as holding local, city, and state government accountable for their actions met this criterion. Finally, at the time I started to follow education issues in New Orleans – about a year after Hurricane Katrina – the DNIA Education Committee was the only group I had heard of to be focused solely on educational equity. I immediately became interested in how their equity-oriented approach fit in within the larger context of rebuilding New Orleans.

I initially made contact with the DNIA Education Committee in New Orleans in November 2006. I attended one of their weekly meetings and proposed a working relationship whereby I would support them in their planning of a community education workshop, scheduled for January 2007, and I would also spend time researching their organization for my master's thesis work. Between November 2006-January 2007, I participated in weekly conference calls with DNIA Education Committee members and a few other supporters of the DNIA Education Committee's work. The Community Education Workshop ended up being postponed, but through these conference calls I was able to build trust with key DNIA Education Committee members while "giving back" to the group. It was important for me to be of some service to the group if I was going to use them as a case study for my research because I did not want to exploit a group of people who were already struggling to recover from the storm and take control over their lives.

### *Data Collection*

I conducted my fieldwork over a 2.5 week period in January 2007. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews, each lasting about an hour. I presented myself as both a student researcher and a supporter of their work. In order to limit any bias this dual role would introduce to my research, I tried to limit my participation to setting up chairs before meetings, taking meeting

minutes, and chauffeuring young people home after meetings, though on a two occasions I did help members prepare position papers and hold up signs during a press conference.

The following table describes my interview subjects. I attempted to achieve a balance between core leaders and general members and between educators and non-educators in order to capture a diversity of perspectives. In addition, I interviewed individuals who interact with the DNIA Education Committee, but who are not DNIA Education Committee members themselves (e.g. the Recovery School District Superintendent Robin Jarvis, DNIA President Drex Blumfeld, and Orleans Parish School Board member Torin Sanders). I also conducted a focus group of Fyre Youth Squad members, a citywide group of public high school students supported by adult members of the DNIA Education Committee, in order to gain a youth perspective. I enlisted the support of a Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral student to co-facilitate the focus group. Because a majority of the Fyre Youth Squad members are under the age of 18 I have kept their names confidential and will refer to them as listed below. There were no outspoken critics of the organization that I heard of. However, if I had had more time, I would have interviewed representatives from other education advocacy organizations and planners who were involved in the UNOP process to gain more “outsider” perspectives.

**Table 1. Interview Schedule**

| <b>Name</b>      | <b>Title/Affiliation</b>   | <b>Interview Date(s)</b>             |
|------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Ray Johnson      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director of Bands, John McDonogh High School</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>  | January 20, 2007<br>January 25, 2007 |
| Audrey Tuckerson | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Math Teacher, John McDonogh High School</li> <li>• Former DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>  | January 23, 2007                     |
| Brenda Square    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archivist, Amistad Research Center</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>  | January 24, 2007                     |
| Donald Jackson   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal, John McDonogh High School</li> </ul>   | January 25, 2007<br>January 30, 2007 |
| Drex Blumfeld    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President, Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association</li> </ul>  | January 25, 2007                     |
| Fyre Youth Squad | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member 1 (male, age 17)</li> <li>• Member 2 (male, age 17)</li> <li>• Member 3 (male, age 16)</li> <li>• Member 4 (female, age 17)</li> <li>• Member 5 (female, age 17)</li> <li>• Member 6 (male, age 16)</li> </ul> | January 25, 2007<br>(focus group)    |
| Walter Goodwin   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Former principal, John McDonogh High School</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>   | January 26, 2007                     |
| Willie Zanders   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attorney</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>  | January 26, 2007                     |
| Bob Tannen       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban Planner/Architect</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>   | January 29, 2007                     |

|                |  |                                       |
|----------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Ellen Tuzzolo  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Advocate, Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul> | January 29, 2007                      |
| Torin Sanders  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orleans Parish School Board member</li> </ul>   | January 29, 2007                      |
| Jamila Wilson  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher, John McDonogh High School</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>                    | January 30, 2007                      |
| Robin Jarvis   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recovery School District Superintendent</li> </ul>  | January 30, 2007                      |
| Liberty Rashad | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum Developer, Young People's Project</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>          | January 31, 2007                      |
| Renard Thomas  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owner, mobile photography studio</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>                      | January 31, 2007                      |
| Broderick Webb | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filmmaker</li> <li>• DNIA Education Committee member</li> </ul>   | February 6, 2007<br>(phone interview) |

Note: All interview subjects are black with the exception of Robin Jarvis, Ellen Tuzzolo, and Bob Tannen who are white.

In addition to interviews and a focus group, I conducted participant observations at about ten DNIA Education Committee meetings and actions. I also conducted a review of local and national media and DNIA Education Committee documentation (e.g. meeting minutes, press kits, fliers, videos of past meetings). My observational data complemented the interview and documentary data. I draw equally from all sources as evidence for my findings.

### *Data analysis*

I recorded all my interviews using a digital recorder and took field notes during my observations. All the interviews were either completely transcribed or partially transcribed with supplemental notes. All interviews and field notes were coded using both inductive and deductive methods.

### **Overview**

I have just laid out my rationale for researching civic engagement in public education in post-Katrina New Orleans, my research question and sub-questions, and my research methods. Chapter 1 will build a conceptual framework, drawing from literature on rebuilding schools after a disaster, urban school reform and civic engagement. Chapter 2 will provide the historical context for the case. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present my case analysis, addressing each of the research sub-questions. Chapter 5 also includes my recommendations for the DNIA Education Committee.



Part I.  
Background

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# 1. The role of civic engagement in rebuilding public education

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## **Introduction**

While much has been written about the failure of urban school reform (Hess, 1999; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Elmore, 2004) we know very little about how urban school systems are rebuilt once their entire infrastructure is destroyed as a result of a disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. We also know little about the role of civic engagement in this rebuilding process. This chapter will lay out a conceptual framework to think about the role of civic engagement in rebuilding public education after Hurricane Katrina, beginning with a summary what we know from the experience in South Florida in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Then, I discuss the tension between equity and excellence, which historically has been salient in urban school reform literature, as a useful frame through which to analyze the rebuilding of public education after a disaster. Finally, I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the literature on citizen engagement that emerges in response to educational inequity. This conceptual framework, coupled with the historical context chapter that follows, sets the stage for the work of the DNIA Education Committee, which has been a critical voice to promote equity in the rebuilding of public education in post-Katrina New Orleans.

## **Rebuilding public education after a disaster**

### *Lessons from the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew*

In August 1992, Hurricane Andrew struck South Florida and, until Hurricane Katrina, was the most devastating hurricane to ever impact the United States. The effects of Hurricane Andrew on Dade County Public Schools (DCPS) were similar to Hurricane Katrina's effects in Orleans Parish in terms of student displacement and mobility, financial and resource constraints at the district level, and the increased mental health problems for students (Pane, McCaffrey, Tharp-Taylor, Asmus, & Stokes, 2006). Therefore, the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew represents an important case from which to glean relevant lessons for the rebuilding of public education in post-Katrina New Orleans.

In their documentation of rebuilding public education in Dade County, Provenzo and Fradd (1995) discovered a few important roles that schools played in the rebuilding process. They found that schools were important to establishing a sense of community by serving as focal points around which community members could unite, schools helped to create a sense of identity for students and faculty, and schools served as social and medical support centers for community members. There are a few reasons that may explain why schools have not served

similar roles in New Orleans. First, the majority of school buildings in New Orleans were destroyed or damaged, leaving few physical buildings to serve as community centers. While Hurricane Andrew was a much stronger storm than Hurricane Katrina, the extent of flooding in New Orleans was far worse (Graumann, et al., 2005). Second, the extent to which social networks were immediately disrupted as a result of displacement and relocation was much greater in New Orleans than in Dade County (Pane, et al., 2006). As a result, it is likely that the lack of communication infrastructure and responsive political leadership prevented school-related networks from reconnecting. Finally, the lack of public trust and investment in public education was likely more pervasive in pre-hurricane New Orleans than pre-hurricane Dade County due to the deep roots of neglect of public education in New Orleans (DeVore, Logsdon, Williams, & Ferguson, 1991). While there are many residents who have long been aware of the neighborhood history and culture embedded in New Orleans schools, these residents have been outnumbered by others who have only seen New Orleans schools as failures.

There is one very important similarity between the rebuilding of public education in Dade County and New Orleans. Soon after Hurricane Andrew hit, the U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander informed DCPS Superintendent Visiedo that the U.S. Department of Education would provide funds to rebuild schools in Dade County provided that the school system would create an “innovative program that would meet the educational needs of children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Provenzo and Fradd, 1995, p.89). This program, dubbed Project Phoenix, technically encompassed reforms that were already underway before the hurricane, including the establishment of competency-based standards, establishment of school choice programs, setting up models for outreach, intervention, and parent involvement, and the implementation of research-based models from local and national sources. Within three months after the hurricane, the federal government released \$12.5 million for Project Phoenix. This funding was loosely tied to the Bush Administration’s America 2000 federal education reform program. While most school leaders and community members were on board with Project Phoenix, it became clear that plans to rebuild the DCPS system “became merged with national political agendas and national efforts at educational reform” (Provenzo and Fradd, 1995, p. 91).

The increased role of a conservative, Republican federal government in shaping local education politics in Dade County is very similar to what happened in New Orleans. While the school reform plan in New Orleans does not have a name, its substance has been influenced by federal agendas to privatize public education. Within three months of Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings promised \$20.9 million to support the creation of charter schools in the city. The language used to describe Project Phoenix also parallels the education reform discourse surrounding New Orleans public schools. Project Phoenix was described as bringing about “a renaissance in urban education,” “a way to create a microcosm of a model urban school system” (Provenzo and Fradd, 1995, p. 90). Similarly, the rhetoric around Hurricane Katrina was that the storm created a “once in a lifetime opportunity” to “experiment” and create a “national model” for school reform (Recovery School District Legislatively Required Plan, 2006) In both cases of Dade County and New Orleans, an opportunity in crisis arose, which is a prerequisite for any type of political advocacy or organizing to take hold (Kingdon, 2003).

### *Gaps in the literature*

Aside from the Provenzo and Fradd book on Hurricane Andrew and the public schools, most of the literature on rebuilding public education after a natural disaster addresses the trauma and mental health needs of students (Black, 2005; Brock & Cowan, 2004). In addition, there are scholarly articles on teaching about natural disasters in schools (Lintner, 2006), homeless students' rights (National Center for Homeless Education, 2006), and school disaster preparedness plans (Brock, et al., 2001). While these are extremely important issues, there are key gaps in the literature. First, the literature does not explicitly address the "public" in public education. What does it mean to rebuild a public education system when the majority of the public served by that system is displaced or relocated? Whose needs are prioritized and to whom is the new system accountable? Second, the literature does not discuss the role of race and racism in school reform. How do oppressed populations challenge systemic inequity and neglect and what are the outcomes of these efforts? Finally, the literature does not situate plans to rebuild public education systems within the context of larger planning issues. How do cities look beyond risk and resilience concerns at the school level and situate rebuilding public education within the systemic needs of communities? For example, it is important to simultaneously consider how many social workers and psychologists are needed to help children cope with separation from loved ones, and decisions about where to strategically build affordable housing so that families have options for quality neighborhood schools.

In order to better understand how public education is rebuilt after a disaster, and to begin to address the questions posed above, we must explore more deeply the tension between equity and excellence in urban school reform discourse and policy.

### **Urban school reform discourse and policy**

#### *Equity vs. excellence*

In the history of urban school reform, equity and excellence have often been pitted against each other as opposite goals, though they are in fact both necessary to achieve the democratic promise of public education. Equity-oriented policies, such as affirmative action in admissions and ending ability tracking implemented during the 1960s and 1970s after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case mandated the desegregation of all public schools, have a distributive justice emphasis. They strive towards achieving a fair distribution of educational access, opportunities, and resources such as public funds, qualified teachers, and educational facilities. Excellence-oriented policies, such as high-stakes testing (linked to parental choice), charter schools, and voucher programs have characterized the post-1980s era of school reform. These reforms advocate a free-market approach where parents are granted school choice and competition between schools coupled with reward/sanction accountability systems result in the best schools staying in business and the worst schools shutting down (Petrovich and Wells, 1995).

It is particularly important to balance equity and excellence in any education reform policy because of the legacy of racial and class segregation in schools across the country (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). School choice plans such as "controlled-choice" plans are effective at balancing

equity and excellence because they both encourage parental choice while preventing increased racial and class segregation in schools (Wells, 1991).

In the 18 months following Hurricane Katrina, charter schools have become the policy option of choice in New Orleans. Since charter schools are a mechanism of school choice, they were categorized as an excellence-oriented policy alternative in the above paradigm. However, an argument can also be made for how charter schools can be a tool to promote equity. Chapter 3 will go into more detail about how charter schools became the policy option of choice in New Orleans. The following section provides a brief overview of charter schools, highlighting their position within the equity/excellence debate.

### *Charter schools and their implications for equity and excellence*

Charter schools are publicly-funded schools that are granted freedom from bureaucratic restrictions yet held to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools. In 1991 Minnesota passed the first charter law and today there are over one million students enrolled in more than 3,500 charter schools in 40 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (<http://www.uscharterschools.org>). Charter school laws have enabled communities of any race, class, and religious background to create schools that address the community's specific cultural and social needs. This has been particularly beneficial for well-organized communities with the human and financial resources to design and sustain a school operation. But it has also empowered members of disenfranchised communities to take public schools into their own hands and ensure that education is locally controlled. On the other hand, the increased autonomy charter schools are given also means that they can be selective in their student admissions and are usually not bound to any collective bargaining agreements garnered by teachers' unions. Finally, while many believe that charter schools are more successful at increasing student achievement than traditional public schools, results from studies are inconclusive (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005).

As I will describe in more detail in the next chapter, long before Hurricane Katrina arrived, New Orleans public schools failed its students. In a system where the quality of schools was so poor, it is no surprise that when given the chance to rethink the potential of public education, decision-makers and the public would quickly focus on school quality. However, by not explicitly addressing questions such as who is entitled to the "good" schools first and how to address the difference between creating one good school and creating a system of good schools, equity can quickly become overshadowed by the goal for excellence.

### **Citizen response to inequity in public education**

When plans to rebuild public education do not explicitly address equity, there is a risk that pre-existing inequities will be exacerbated and new inequities will be created. When the threat to equity meets a "window of opportunity" to recreate a school system, civic engagement in public education can be a powerful force to promote social and educational justice. Specifically, citizens can help to create a political will for equity-oriented reform that either does not already exist in the policy discourse or is purposefully thwarted by conservative forces.

### *Opportunities and pitfalls of citizen engagement in planning*

In the plural model of planning, citizen mobilization to create alternative visions or plans to a government agency plan ultimately leads to better plans. The presence of multiple plans provides the opportunity to determine the public interest through a process of contention and deliberation (Davidoff, 1965). Citizen engagement in planning also brings local knowledge to the table, without which any large-scale attempt at planning will fail (Scott, 1998). Given these benefits of citizen engagement, there are also potential pitfalls. For example, how to determine the legitimacy of a citizen-generated plan over the government agency plan and how to manage impasses in the deliberation process complicate decision-making as well as increase the time and resources required to get things done (Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987).

### *Charting a path toward equity-oriented reform*

Scholars offer various paths for ordinary citizens to follow as they strive to create a political will for equity-oriented school reform. Jean Anyon (2005) argues that citizens must actively engage in the building of a social movement that fights for policies that fundamentally address the causes of urban poverty (e.g. lack of a living wage, transportation policy that limits access of working class people of color in cities to suburban jobs). Anyon argues that until the macroeconomic and regional policies that create inequity in cities are reformed, educational inequity in schools will not be adequately addressed. While this argument makes powerfully clear the inextricable connections between education policy and economic policy, this strategy has its limits when applied to the New Orleans context. Building a social movement requires the leveraging of pre-existing institutions and networks, massive organizing of individuals, and time. Assuming that an educational justice movement was not already in progress when Katrina struck, it would be very difficult for any group of individuals or a community organization to organize a social movement considering the extent to which social networks and organizational infrastructure have been disrupted. In addition, in New Orleans, not only is time already a scarce resource for people who are consumed with physically and economically rebuilding their lives (even 18 months after the storm), but the urgency of addressing the inequity of public education at this particular moment in time looms large.

Like Anyon, Clarence Stone, et al. (2001) argue that urban education will not improve unless the problems that schools face are conceived within a broader community context. Rather than propose the building of a broad-based social movement, Stone, et al. argue for the development of a broad-based coalition, or civic alliance, that brings together leaders from all sectors in the community to collectively solve problems. However, in order for a civic alliance to get things done, the authors argue that the alliance must be institutionalized and that government is the best entity best suited to do that. In New Orleans, the possibility exists of the state government, which has taken a prominent role in reforming public education in the city, taking on the responsibility of convening and institutionalizing a civic alliance, but there are no signs they are moving in that direction yet.

With the conditions not quite right for the building of a social movement or a broad-based civic alliance, citizens in New Orleans have a number of other options to pursue an equity-oriented school reform agenda. Due to the immediacy of students' needs, citizens can become directly

involved in making the change they would like to see in schools. From supporting the development of full-service community schools, sponsoring a locally-driven charter school, or organizing for school reform, ordinary citizens can directly impact schools (Warren, 2005). In Chapter 5 I will return to the idea that if inequity is the target, a group of citizens have to think creatively and strategically about which model or hybrid of these models of school-community collaboration will enable them to meet their goals considering their resources and constraints. Ultimately, in order for any group of citizens to become part of a social movement, become a player in a civic alliance, or develop a community-based vision for a school, the group must first build its community capacity (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). I will revisit this concept in Chapter 5 as a means to think about the evolution and potential of the DNIA Education Committee.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a conceptual framework for analyzing the DNIA Education Committee as a case of civic engagement to promote educational equity in New Orleans public schools. I drew from concepts within three bodies of literature that help to frame this analysis: 1) rebuilding public education after a disaster, 2) urban school reform policy, and 3) citizen engagement in creating and promoting a vision for social change. I argue that when confronted with a threat to equity, ordinary citizens will mobilize to challenge that inequity by creating a political will for equity-oriented reform. However, the specifics of what this looks like will be determined by the particular context in which citizens are situated. This will be the subject of the following chapter.

## 2. Historical context of New Orleans public education

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*I notice the sidewalks in front of John McDonogh High School are cracked and the concrete is almost completely uprooted in some areas. Some of the exterior brick of the building needs replacing and the grass needs watering. The chain link fence that surrounds the school makes me feel unwelcome, even though I've visited the school many times over the last few weeks. The school is located on the historic Esplanade Avenue in the Tremé, the oldest African American neighborhood in the country. The monumental oak trees that line the 'neutral ground' on Esplanade Avenue, with their sturdy trunks and deep, thick roots inspire me and remind me of the history of this place.*

*This school was probably once a very beautiful building, the kind of building that slows down traffic as people stop to take a look and smile, warmed by the thought of the potential of young minds being set free within those school walls. But on this day, a cloudy January morning in 2007, the contrast between the oak trees and the school saddens me. As has become customary over the last few weeks, as I observe vacant lots, dilapidated houses and closed businesses, I ask myself: did Katrina do this? When did things become so bad? It's a question that lingers as I drive to my last meal in New Orleans before I fly back to Boston.*

- Field note, January 14, 2007

### **Introduction**

Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. The impacts were devastating, leaving hundreds of thousands of people without homes and jobs, separated from loved ones, and perhaps most difficult, left with a deep sense of uncertainty of what the future would hold for their lives and their communities. Due to the catastrophic nature and impacts of the storm, it is easy to dichotomize life in the region as either *pre-Katrina* or *post-Katrina*. However, life is not as static as these two labels presume. As we try to make sense of the current complex environment of recovery and rebuilding, it is important to delve deeper into the contextual factors of pre-Katrina New Orleans that have directly shaped the current climate and informed responses from the public and policymakers.

One of these contextual factors is that there is a long legacy of black leaders and parents fighting inequity in the public education system, from secretly educating black children when public education was for whites only to filing numerous law suits to challenge racial segregation of

schools and the inferiority of black education compared to white education. A second important contextual factor is that in recent years, the New Orleans public school system has been a failing system, to the point where there has been little hope by anyone that any combination of piecemeal reforms would be able to reverse its downward spiral. This failure to educate young people has only been exacerbated by financial and political crises of the local school board. With no faith in the local government to provide a decent public education to New Orleanians, the public education system was essentially already a disaster before anyone had even heard of Hurricane Katrina. The final contextual factor is that there was already some buy-in for school choice, particularly charter schools, by parents and education leaders as a means to provide families with options beyond their neighborhood schools in order to receive a quality public education. The proliferation of charter schools after the storm, while unprecedented in number, was not a brand new idea in Louisiana or New Orleans nor was it unique compared to what other large urban districts had been exploring since the mid-1990s.

These contextual factors are important because they demonstrate that Hurricane Katrina was not the sole cause for the changes that occurred in the public education system after the storm hit. The history of racial inequity, academic failure, lack of public trust in local government, and experimentation with school choice collectively provided the impetus for the state and federal government to intervene with systems of accountability and market-based school reform strategies. In addition, Hurricane Katrina did not suddenly turn apathetic residents into actively engaged citizens. However, the storm did create a unique opportunity for people to confront the reality of the condition of public education and figure out how they would act to change it.

### **Historical legacy of the black community's response to educational inequity**

DeVore, et al. (1991) provide a detailed history of public education in New Orleans from 1841-1991. Rather than attempt to summarize their work, this section will illuminate how throughout the major eras in the last 165 years black New Orleanians have consistently challenged inequity in the city's public education system, utilizing various strategies to achieve their goals.

#### *The beginning of public education in New Orleans*

Public schools were started in New Orleans in 1841 under the leadership of Joshua Baldwin, the judicial officer for one of the three municipalities in New Orleans. Baldwin was interested in importing the statewide model of "common schools" that Horace Mann had developed in Massachusetts as the state's secretary of education. At Baldwin's request, Mann sent John Shaw, chairman of the education committee in the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature, to launch the public school system in New Orleans. Shaw began by creating two primary schools, one for boys and one for girls, importing everything from teachers, textbooks, and furniture from Boston to get the schools started. The schools were a success, marking New Orleans, which at this time was the largest city in the South, as the pioneer city for public education in the South. However, not all children benefited from this unprecedented effort. Public education was being offered to white children only. Even as most black children had gained access to public education in the North by the 1850s, state law and city ordinances in Louisiana forbade formal education for the more than 14,000 slaves and denied free public education to the 11,000 free black people in New Orleans.



In spite of this inequity in access to public education, the literacy rate in the 1860s among free blacks in New Orleans was probably higher than that of whites in the whole state of Louisiana. A small group of light skinned blacks “passed” for white and were able to access the free public schools. More commonly, free blacks were able to access education by attending private or parochial schools. The free black community also secretly organized their own free schools when it was illegal and dangerous to do so. The Couvent school is one such school, started with a bequest from a free African woman named Marie Couvent. The school was called an orphans’ school and was operated through the Catholic Church, but it was operated by all lay black personnel and was open to any black child, regardless of religious identity or orphan status. While the Couvent school had to disguise its true intentions – to provide a free education to black children – before the Civil War, the school’s major legacy was to produce the chief leaders in the integration movement years later.

### *Reconstruction era*

The Reconstruction era in New Orleans lasted from 1862-1877 and was characterized by increased rights for blacks and a growing integrationist movement. Under military rule, the local public education system, which had survived and grown during the Civil War, was consolidated from a four-district system into one Bureau of Education. During this period public schooling was offered to free black men who were recruited to join the army. As the army program grew, so did pressure from black leaders and parents for their own public schools. In 1862 a delegation of free black leaders traveled to Boston and in front of the governor of Massachusetts and major abolitionist leaders declared their desire for free black education in Louisiana. In 1864, after mounting pressure by abolitionists, the commanding general set up a separate board of education for black Louisianians.

In 1867, black New Orleanians faced a great of resistance by conservative local and state officials to integrate the public schools even though the new state constitution mandated desegregation. Black leaders and parents challenged the local school board’s policies. At one point they gained admission of 28 black girls to one white school, though the board quickly overturned this decision. From 1868-1875, under a new superintendent and school board leadership, the schools began to desegregate. There was a brief exodus of white students to private schools, but they soon returned due to the high cost and lower quality of the private schools.

### *Jim Crow era*

After reconstruction, under new Southern civilian leadership, violent protests to integration by whites erupted. In 1877, a new school board was elected, whose members quickly made it their mission to reestablish racially segregated schools. A delegation of Black New Orleanians presented a petition to the board, protesting this decision. Their petition was unsuccessful, but their resistance to segregation through petitions and lawsuits continued and intensified, culminating in a U.S. Supreme Court lawsuit against railroad segregation. Black leaders lost the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 when the Supreme Court sanctioned the “separate but equal” doctrine for all public facilities, including schools, but their legacy of protest remained.

By 1900, virtually all black voters in New Orleans and Louisiana had become disenfranchised. Jim Crow segregation laws codified white supremacist ideals, segregating and subordinating blacks from whites in virtually all aspects of life. By this time, the quality of public education as a whole had severely declined, and even when the school board started to receive a new infusion of property taxes to fund the school system, black schools did not benefit. In fact, public education for blacks was reduced to the first five grades, eliminating opportunities for black high schooling as well as the publicly supported pipeline to the city's private black colleges.

In spite of being stripped of their political power, black leaders developed new strategies to improve public education for blacks within the segregated system. They utilized newspapers such as *The Advocate* and *The Crusader* and *Louisiana Weekly* to rally black New Orleanians to challenge segregation. They also worked through black community, civic, religious, and educational organizations to work on neighborhood-based as well as city-based improvements in black education. Their concerns included the poor quality of facilities, overcrowding, lack of a high school, need for vocational training programs, employment of more black teachers, and equalization of pay between black and white teachers. They advocated for these issues by conducting their own research on the quality of black schools and writing up their findings in reports, drawing up petitions, and engaging in cordial dialogue with school board members. While black leaders achieved a few of their goals, they realized that their primary strategy of petitioning school officials for improvements would not be sufficient to equalize educational opportunities for blacks.

### *The battle for desegregation*

The end of World War II brought about renewed calls for desegregation and educational equity by black leaders, with the equalization of facilities going to the forefront. In 1948, there were 87 facilities for white students and 34 facilities for black students in New Orleans, even though there were equal enrollments of black and white students. A series of lawsuits in support of equal facilities followed, culminating in the historic 1954 U.S Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine and mandated the desegregation of all public schools. Local and state officials refused to comply with this decision and black leaders continued to press for desegregation by suing for compliance, submitting petitions to the board, having black parents file applications for admission for their children to enter white schools, and attempting to win support from the white community for desegregation. Finally, desegregation started in November 1960, with the entry of four black students into previously all-white schools.

Student and faculty desegregation proceeded slowly throughout the 1960s, then more rapidly in the 1970s. During the 1970s black enrollment was at an all-time high, and white enrollment was on a steady decline due to "white flight" from urban to suburban districts. By the 1980-81 school year, the majority of black public school students were attending predominantly black schools because white enrollment had declined to about 16% of total public school enrollment.

### *New challenges to operating a large urban system*

By the 1980s, there were several black leaders within the public education system, including the first black superintendent who took office in 1985. By this time, the issue of desegregation was replaced by the larger question of how to operate a large urban school system while countering community problems such as violence, drugs, and teenage pregnancy. In addition, the pivotal report *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983, chronicling the steady decline of public education across the country. This report prompted numerous reform initiatives and, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, marked a shift in education policy from that of “fixing society” to “fixing schools.”

New Orleanians have continued to be involved in educational advocacy, but it has mostly occurred at the neighborhood level and has never reached the impact similar to the battles for access to public education and for desegregation. Over the last decade, individual community residents have been able to be active in organizations such as the Douglass Community Coalition, All Congregations Together, ACORN, and the NAACP in order to be active in the fight for educational equity in New Orleans.

### **Recent context: pre-Katrina**

The previous section provided a brief synopsis of the evolution of public education in New Orleans, highlighting the particular efforts of black residents to challenge educational inequity. The next two sections will lay out the more recent context of public education, both pre-Katrina and post-Katrina, which will set the stage for the DNIA Education Committee’s response to educational inequity.

#### *A failing public school system*

By the 1990s, the Orleans Parish school district was one of the country’s largest urban school districts, and one of the worst. During the 2004-2005 school year the system was comprised of 64,920 students and 127 public schools, of which 63% were designated as “academically unacceptable” based on the state and district accountability system, compared to just 8% of schools in the state. As previously mentioned, whites fled the city’s public school system in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving a majority black student population. During the 2004-2005 school year, 93 percent of the students in Orleans Parish schools were black. In addition, a majority of the students in the public school system were poor. During the 2004-2005 school year 77% of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, the commonly used proxy for poverty. The demographics of the school system coupled with system-wide academic failure, suggests that poor black students and their families have been the group to suffer the most within the public school system. This is also evidenced by the fact that the achievement gap between blacks and whites is twice as high in New Orleans as it is statewide (Recovery School District Legislatively Required Plan, June 7, 2006).

Due to the inability of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to provide quality education for New Orleans students, the state decided to intervene in 2003. Legislation was passed allowing the state to take over schools determined to be “academically unacceptable” for at least four years in a row. The legislation allowed for the operation of a state school district, the Recovery School District (RSD), to be administered by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) and

subject to the authority of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). The first school was added to the RSD in July 2004. In July 2005, four more schools were added. At this time, it was decided that all schools that would go into the RSD would be chartered to independent agencies.

Perhaps because of its name, many people believe that the RSD was created after the storm when in fact it was an existing entity for two years prior. However, the criteria it used to determine which schools would fall under state control did change after the storm, which brought suspicion that the RSD's agenda was not solely to promote accountability in a failing system, but to strip the local school board of its power and to take decision-making about schools out of the government's hands and put it into private hands.

### *Financial and political crises*

At this time, OPSB was also experiencing major financial crises which, coupled with the system-wide academic failure, called into question the local school board's ability to govern effectively. Regarding OPSB's finances, the district had not had a clean audit finding since June 2002, the payroll system was filled with inaccurate data (for example, they found that 4,300 out of the 7,000 checks issued in that pay period were inaccurate), and the federal government had been pressuring State Superintendent Cecil Picard to get involved in OPSB's affairs due to an audit finding of \$71 million in questioned federal Title I grant spending (*Times Picayune*, May 5, 2005).

On July 14, 2005, State Superintendent Picard hired Alvarez and Marsal, a private turnaround firm from New York, to manage the city's school finances for a period of three years at a cost of \$16.8 million. While there was some sentiment by OPSB members that this contract would take away too much local control and lead to privatization of the public school system, Superintendent Picard threatened a complete state takeover unless OPSB agreed. After a few months of heated debate and negotiations, OPSB and Superintendent Picard agreed that Alvaraz & Marsal would report directly to Superintendent Picard and handle the business-related decisions for the central office while OPSB would still have control over its own budget and school-based purchasing and hiring.

Just weeks before Hurricane Katrina hit the city, Alvarez & Marsal estimated that at least \$48 million in cuts would need to be made to the \$400 million OPSB budget (*Times-Picayune*, August 19, 2005). In addition, faced with the prospect of not making payroll at the start of the school year, OPSB requested and was granted a \$50 million loan from the State Bond Commission. Just days before the storm arrived, nearly 300 non-teaching positions were eliminated (*Times-Picayune*, August 29, 2005). These decisions demonstrate that a dramatic shift in the way OPSB did business was already underway when Katrina struck. In addition, with a private, out-of-state firm whose expertise is in financial management, not education, is running a school system, the kinds of decisions that will be made about how to effectively and efficiently recover and rebuild after a major hurricane will likely be very different than if the local school board were still in complete control.

### *Experimentation with school choice*

Long before Hurricane Katrina hit, school choice, including vouchers and charter schools, had been a part of the education reform discourse in New Orleans and Louisiana. Louisiana's charter school law passed in 1995 as a pilot program to allow up to eight school districts to volunteer to participate. In 1997 the law was revised to allow any district in the state to participate and the number of charter schools statewide was capped at 42.

After the failure of several House and Senate bills, a state voucher law passed in 2001. The law allowed for a one-year pilot program, the Louisiana Parental Choice in Primary Education Demonstration Program, to help low-income families pay tuition for private pre-school. This program has continued every year since 2001 though it is not a permanently authorized program. Over the last few years several other voucher bills have failed at the House or Senate Committees (<http://www.heritage.org>).

For many New Orleanians, formal school choice options within the public school system have not been sufficient incentive to remain within it. Opting out of the public school system has been more common in New Orleans than in a majority of cities in the country. During the 2004-2005 school year, 71 percent of students in Orleans Parish were enrolled in public school, which is much lower than the state figure of 84% (<http://www.doe.state.la.us>). This is quite significant considering that Louisiana historically has had the highest percentage of school-age children in private schools in the country (*Times-Picayune*, May 16, 2005).

### **Recent context: post-Katrina**

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused the largest displacement of students in US history. New Orleans was the hardest hit, with 33.5% of the more than 196,000 students displaced from the Louisiana public school system coming from Orleans Parish (Pane, et. al, 2006). In addition to the displacement of students, teachers, and administrators, 80% of the school buildings in New Orleans were damaged or destroyed (*Times-Picayune*, October 3, 2005).

### *Changes in the student population*

Before New Orleans schools got back on its feet after the storm, district and private schools in neighboring areas and in the cities to which residents were evacuated opened up their doors to try and accommodate as many of the storm-affected students as possible. However, many students remained unaccounted for or without any options for going back to school. By late November 2005, three months after the storm hit, some schools in Orleans Parish reopened. By mid-January 2006, these schools were enrolling about 4,000 students. For nearly the entire 2005-2006 school year, most students were attending different schools than the schools they had previously attended (Pane, et. al, 2006).

In addition to being temporarily relocated to schools in neighborhoods that they did not call home, many students returning to the city had special needs that schools were unable to address due to the lack of human and financial resources. Compared to before the storm, displaced students required increased mental health services to deal with the trauma of the storm and its impacts, they were engaging more frequently in negative behaviors such as fighting, breaking

school rules, arguing, and bullying, and some students had returned to the city without their parents and were living on their own or with an older sibling other relative. Finally, due to the lack of school-related documentation (e.g. grades, IEPs for students with special needs), principals had a difficult time with placing students in the appropriate grade or providing them with required services, leading many students feeling underserved and neglected (Pane, et. al, 2006).

### *Citywide planning for recovery and rebuilding*

In October 2005, Mayor Nagin created the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), an initiative to bring diverse stakeholders together in a comprehensive planning process to develop plans to rebuild the major areas of the city's infrastructure. These areas included land use, levee and flood protection, public transit, criminal justice, culture, education, health and social services, economic development, and government and effectiveness. The BNOB Education Subcommittee met several times over the course of the six-month process and brought in educational experts from across the country to make recommendations on how the city could build a "world class" system of public education in New Orleans. However, the BNOB Education Subcommittee's plan was not released until January 2006. Schools had already been open for a full three months by the time the plan was released. In addition, decisions at the state level were being made that would determine a new and complicated governance structure for public education. This was a case of planning not being able to catch up with reality of what was happening on the ground.

The timing of the city plan was not the only issue. The rationale for many of the recommendations of the BNOB Commission was that in order for New Orleans' future to be sustainable, the city's footprint would have to shrink. This message met with a great deal of resistance by residents who had been evacuated to cities like Baton Rouge, LA and Houston, TX and were awaiting news that it was safe for them to return home. Many people became suspicious that the citywide plan was not just a call for a reduced population, but a thinly veiled vision for a New Orleans with fewer poor people and fewer black people. It wasn't until several months later with the more participatory UNOP planning process that the rhetoric around rebuilding shifted to affirm displaced residents' desire and ability to return home.

### *Changes in governance*

Immediately following the storm, decisions were being made at all levels of government that set the wheels in motion for the creation of a dramatically different school governance structure. In September 2005, United States Secretary of Education Margeret Spellings announced that charter schools were "uniquely equipped" to handle the situation in New Orleans. She waived some federal restrictions to make it easier to open charter schools in the city and announced a \$20.9 federal grant to support charter schools (<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/>). In October 2005, Louisiana Governor Blanco changed the charter law to make it easier to start a charter school and Superintendent Cecil Picard announced that no schools should open unless they were charter schools, considering the district's finances and "problems with current leadership." (*Times-Picayune*, October 25, 2005). Organizations such as the Gates Foundation, Broad Foundation, and Aspen Institute were all interested in contributing philanthropic dollars to

support the opening of charter schools in the city. In November 2005, a Special Session of the Louisiana Legislature expanded the definition of a failed school to include those that scored below the state average and that operated in school systems which had been declared to be in “Academic Crisis,” meaning the system had at least one school labeled as failing for four or more years. While this expanded definition applied to the entire state, it was only schools in Orleans Parish that met the criteria. As a result of this legislation, the RSD took over 107 of the 117 schools in Orleans Parish from the OPSB, with plans to charter out as many as possible to outside agencies.

Establishing charter schools quickly became the optimal mode of reopening schools. The easing of restrictions at the federal and state levels, along with financial support from the federal government and philanthropic organizations, enabled schools to open quickly. In December 2005, the Algiers Charter Association opened as the first ‘district’ of charter schools in New Orleans. Several other schools that were previously district schools, including Benjamin Franklin High School and Lusher Alternative Elementary School, reopened as charter schools. By sponsoring charter schools, community groups were able to ensure their specific needs were being met. However, the fact that charter schools were allowed to set admissions criteria and set an enrollment cap meant that not all students who needed a seat in a school were guaranteed one. For example, when Lusher Alternative Elementary School was reopened as Lusher Charter School, first preference for admission was given to the children of professional staff at Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, and Xavier Universities. While this was a boon for the families whose children who were selected, many other families were excluded. In January 2006, OPSB officials presented state officials with a list of 170 students who were turned away from New Orleans schools because charter schools were filled to capacity and RSD schools, the only schools required to guarantee a seat for students, would not be operating at scale until the following school year.

A total of 53 schools opened in New Orleans for the 2006-2007 school year. Twenty-one different entities operated these schools, creating a complicated system of public school governance. The following list, excerpted from Center for Community Change report *Dismantling a Community* summarizes the governance structure for the 2006-2007 school year:

- 13 are charters authorized by the Recovery School District and operated by independent charter associations, for-profit entities, national charter school operators or others;
- 6 are charters operated by the Algiers Charter School Association
- 2 are charters authorized directly by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and operated by separate entities;
- 5 schools are operated directly by the Orleans Parish School Board. Four of those are selected admissions schools;
- 10 are charters approved by the Orleans Parish School Board and operated by a range of groups;
- 17 are operated directly by the Recovery School District. They are all open admission schools and must guarantee seats for all students who enroll.

Many returning residents did not understand how to navigate this new complex system and were sharing their experiences of confusion and fear with each other. The situation only worsened as

more students returned. In January 2007, 300 students were without schools because there were not enough seats between the charter schools and the open enrollment RSD and OPSB schools.

## **Conclusion**

History shows how under extremely oppressive circumstances, black leaders and parents have been persistent in pressuring local and state education leaders to abolish educational inequity, particularly as it pertained to the disparity in access to and quality of schools for blacks. Black leaders and parents utilized various tactics to pressure government officials, ranging from cordial dialogue to high profile litigation. While putting pressure on government officials was one method of exerting their influence, blacks have also focused on building their own knowledge and power. They educated themselves when it was illegal and dangerous to do so, and spread awareness among the black community about educational inequities through their own newspapers and organizations. The black community has essentially had to rely on a dual, iterative approach to challenging educational inequity: 1) holding external decision-makers accountable for providing equal education and 2) building knowledge and capacity internally in order to gain authentic decision-making power.

It is important to note that the strong activism within the black community that characterized the earlier eras in history faded somewhat by the 1980s. This does not appear to be a result of an apathetic generation, but a consequence of the shift in education policy discourse from equity to excellence. Whereas education was framed as being intrinsically connected to larger social equity issues in the pre-1980s era, the focus then shifted to more of the technical aspects of instruction, leadership, and operations. In the latter era, it is not surprising that individuals would become disengaged from education-related issues if they did not see the connection between those technical aspects of education and their own lives. Later, I will discuss how Hurricane Katrina acted as a trigger of sorts, reinvigorating ordinary citizens to see the connections between public education and their own lives.

The next chapter will introduce the case of the DNIA Education Committee and will describe how the legacy of civic engagement to promote equity in education continued after the storm, but changed as a result of the recent context which was fraught with academic failure, financial crisis, and lack of public trust in the local school board.



Part II.

**Case Analysis: The DNIA Education Committee**

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### 3. Goals and key processes

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#### **Introduction**

In January 2006, members of the Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association started to meet and share their confusion and fear about the future direction of public education in New Orleans. The next three chapters describe this organization and its accomplishments in promoting equity in public education. The story of the DNIA Education Committee demonstrates how the legacy of historical educational inequity is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of black residents, particularly poor people and those whose parents and earlier generations experienced public education in New Orleans.

This chapter will describe the evolution of the DNIA Education Committee from a subcommittee of an existing equity-oriented neighborhood improvement association into a virtually autonomous citywide initiative. This chapter will also delve into how the group initially identified its goals and the key processes it utilizes to achieve those goals.

#### **The DNIA: Not your everyday NIMBY neighborhood association**

The Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association (DNIA) was founded in 2003 with the following mission: “The Downtown Neighborhoods Improvement Association in cooperation with all of our citizens and organizations, exists to improve public health, education, the environment and safety; foster social interaction; create economic opportunity; respect and enhance our cultural and architectural heritage. We represent the neighborhoods bounded by N. Rampart, Orleans Avenue/Basin Street, N. Broad Street and Gentilly Boulevard to St. Bernard Avenue.”

Founding members of the DNIA were members of the Esplanade Ridge-Tremé Civic Association (ERTCA), an organization focused on addressing quality of life issues such as crime, trash pick-up, and street cleaning for the Esplanade Ridge neighborhood. These members were concerned that ERTCA was not adequately serving the needs of all the residents that fell within the association’s boundaries. They believed that resources that should have been invested in the predominantly African-American and low to middle income neighborhoods 7<sup>th</sup> ward, St. Bernard and Mid-City neighborhoods were being disproportionately targeted to the Esplanade Ridge neighborhood, a predominantly wealthy white neighborhood. As a result of this concern, several members decided to start a new organization that would serve as an umbrella neighborhood association for the smaller block associations and neighborhood associations that

existed across a number of underserved neighborhoods. As a result, the DNIA's boundaries were drawn to purposefully bridge a series of neighborhoods in the Greater Tremé area, with an explicit inclusion of the Lafitte and St. Bernard public housing developments.

The DNIA wanted to distinguish itself from the Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) image of many neighborhood improvement associations that are primarily concerned with improving property values by keeping certain populations and projects out of their neighborhood. It focused its efforts on providing financial assistance and advocacy support to the smaller neighborhood associations, block associations, and resident councils, some of which did not have 501(c)3 status to pursue grants on their own or the number of people to fight for services at City Hall. The DNIA has incubated a few organizations that are currently independent non-profit organizations serving neighborhood needs such as the Neighborhood Planning Network (NPN) and Phoenix New Orleans (PNOLA).

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, despite the displacement of a majority of the city's residents, there has been an emergence of new neighborhood groups and a revitalization of existing groups. According to DNIA President Drex Blumfeld, after the storm many neighborhood groups in the Greater Tremé area rallied support and resources to become stronger than before in order to rebuild their homes and participate in the UNOP process. The UNOP process divided the city into planning districts and required residents within these planning districts to develop their own neighborhood plans. As a result of this renewed civic engagement, as well as an acknowledgement of the changing demographics in the Tremé, the DNIA had to reevaluate its mission and structure as an umbrella support organization best meeting the current needs of its residents. Some of its current projects include a partnership with Tulane University to survey business activity in the Greater Tremé, and a neutral ground (street medians) beautification project on Esplanade Avenue. According to Blumfeld, the emergence of the Education Committee has been the most significant work the DNIA has taken on since the storm.

### **The emergence of education as a top priority**

Liberty Rashad, DNIA Education Committee co-founder and member, explained how education emerged as a top priority within the DNIA:

We hadn't been talking about [education] too much in the DNIA. We had been talking a lot about other issues – housing issues and neighborhood development issues and those kinds of things. There was crime – there was other things that were concerning. There was a big thing with the racetrack changing its ownership and how that was going to impact things. They were bringing in all these machines so there was a lot of that kind of conversation in the DNIA. But I would say as a whole in the city the conversation [about education] changed radically because the state took over.

Pre-Katrina, the role of the DNIA Education Committee was to keep abreast of activities in the schools within the DNIA's geographic boundary. If members discovered an issue of concern, they would bring it to the DNIA general meeting for discussion. However, there was little action or advocacy around education that came about through this committee; it served more as a

monitoring group. This quickly changed after the storm. A few DNIA members, who returned to the city within the first few months after the city's evacuation orders, were struck by the RSD's decision to take over 107 schools in Orleans Parish, and were concerned about the RSD's ability to open and run schools from Baton Rouge, the state capitol. In addition, DNIA members were hearing that many public schools – whether they were operated by the RSD, Orleans Parish, or through an independent agency – were reopening as charter schools, and that there were selective admissions processes and enrollment caps that excluded some young people from attending. These changes in school governance; the visible presence of young people who were back in the city but did not have schools to attend; and the overwhelming desire by returning residents to understand what was going on around them were the initial factors that motivated the reinvigoration of the DNIA Education Committee. The way in which Hurricane Katrina exposed the inadequacies of the public schools and the need for community input was unprecedented and gave the DNIA “more reason for being.” Aside from these reasons, DNIA Education Committee member Torin Sanders believed that it just made sense for the DNIA to focus on education. He explained:

The community is recognizing the overall goal of public education. There's a reason why we have public education. A democracy needs educated citizens and without educated citizens neighborhoods don't work. That's why it makes complete sense for a neighborhood organization to make education its central thing that it's doing.

The DNIA President and Board were pleased that the DNIA Education Committee wanted to take a new, more active direction after the storm. Most of the smaller neighborhood associations within DNIA's boundary did not have education committees, so their members could plug into the DNIA Education Committee if they desired. In addition, the DNIA Education Committee's emphasis on public schools across the city rather than just in the neighborhood opened up an opportunity for the DNIA to be a leading voice for change in the city, which was an exciting prospect.

## **Goals**

After the storm, the DNIA resumed meetings in January 2006. From the initiative of a few members who were deeply concerned with how and which schools would be reopened to serve returning students, the Education Committee grew each week. The founding members included Bob Tannen, a white urban planner/architect and thirty-year resident in the Tremé; Liberty Rashad, a black educator and newcomer to Tremé; and Reynard Sanders, a former principal of John McDonogh High School (John Mac).

The initial meetings of the DNIA Education Committee served mostly as a “chat group” for people interested in learning more about the changes happening in the public school system. Rashad recalls:

The initial meetings were just trying to figure out what the hell was going on. And we just had people come and start talking...And everybody was trying to get schooled on what was going on because all of a sudden you had this myriad of

systems and everything was just so confusing. All of the crises and all of the chaos, this plan and that plan and this system and that. So our first few meetings were literally just trying to sort it all out and trying to make sense of it.

The changes in school governance after the storm were indeed confusing for many returning families. While most of the initial members of the DNIA Education Committee were not parents of children impacted by these changes, they saw themselves as having a responsibility to the young people in their community, many of whom were back in the city without their parents and/or the support networks they had before the storm.

After several meetings of information sharing, DNIA Education Committee members decided they did not just want to talk about issues, they wanted to take action. They created a list of all the issues they thought were important to focus on and then narrowed it down to two key goals. First, they decided they wanted to empower young people to have their voices included in the conversation about the reopening of schools and how the system for the entire city was being revamped. Secondly, they wanted to get John Mac, the one high school that fell within the DNIA's boundary, to open as a community-centered school through a shared governance agreement with the RSD. A third goal emerged later once members learned about the conditions in which children were learning. This goal was to advocate for "world-class" education in all public schools in the city. The three goals described above were prioritized because DNIA Education Committee members thought they were important and that they could realistically accomplish them.

#### *Youth empowerment: the "no brainer" goal*

Among the three goals, the commitment to empowering young people was most obviously a "no-brainer" to pursue. It was difficult for DNIA Education Committee members to ignore that the hundreds of young people in the city who were not engaged in anything productive after the storm were in fact the most important population to be involved in planning the future of public schools, since they were the ones who would be directly affected by changes. In addition, the type of people who gravitated toward the DNIA Education Committee were people who held deep beliefs that the education of young people did not only happen in classrooms and that it was adults' responsibility to teach young people how to think about and participate in their community. DNIA Education Committee member Ray Johnson explained his perspective as a veteran teacher and activist:

I've been an activist for many years. I've been concerned about students and working with students over 20 years. Especially at [John Mac], you're dealing with kids who don't have parents, students whose parents may be incarcerated, young females who have kids. In this day and age a teacher's job is just not about the classroom. We're teaching social ills, society's structure, psychology, coping... The members of the [DNIA Education Committee] function as surrogate parents with the students we have contact with. We treat these students as if they're our own kids.

Whether or not a DNIA Education Committee member was a parent to a child in the New Orleans public schools, many members expressed a clear desire to nurture, much like the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” directs community members to do.

*Creation of a community-centered school: the “strategic” goal*

The goal of creating a community-centered school at John Mac was pursued for more strategic reasons than the youth empowerment goal. According to RSD Superintendent Robin Jarvis, it was the RSD’s intention to charter as many as possible of the 107 schools that became part of the state district after the storm. However, some schools (e.g. John Mac) remained under state control because there were not enough charter agencies willing and able to operate all the schools. DNIA Education Committee members observed how many of the new charter schools had selective admissions processes and enrollment caps and how difficult it was for parents to find out about their options for their children. As a result, they became ideologically opposed to charter schools, believing that charter schools could not serve the most vulnerable students – those without parents, those whose parents could not easily access information about school options, and those whose parents did not have the social networks to advocate for their child’s admission into a selective school. However, at the same time that DNIA Education Committee members took a stance against charter schools, they did believe in what many charter schools were able to provide for communities: local control of a school’s vision, instruction, and culture. DNIA Education Committee member Bob Tannen explained how members wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to gain local control of John Mac without participating in what they perceived to be a model of school governance that exacerbated educational inequity:

We didn't want to have a charter school...We wanted to have a representative community organization working with the state which is different from a charter school where those who have the charter control the school. We wanted this to be broad-based public education facility but with a representative neighborhood board...that...worked closely with the faculty, with parents, with students...[W]e just assumed conceptually that it would be a good thing, since the state had the money...to run the schools, but what they didn't have was any representation locally. They're based in Baton Rouge, the school's here in New Orleans. They were going to be running the schools out of Baton Rouge. It seemed to be a natural fit to have a local community board working with the state.

Embedded in this and other explanations DNIA Education Committee members gave for why it made sense for there to be a local community board was the idea that the local community had a perspective that the state did not have, not solely because of proximity to the school but because of the knowledge they possessed just by living in the community on a day to day basis.

*Advocacy for “world-class, community-centered” public schools: the “educational justice” goal*

The school year began at John Mac on October 16, 2006 and the DNIA Education Committee did not have a formalized partnership with the state in place. However, it had been having its weekly meetings in the school’s library for several months and monitoring the conditions in the school through conversations with Principal Donald Jackson, teachers who had become members

of the DNIA Education Committee, and with students. It became apparent to DNIA Education Committee members that “immediate harm was being done” to young people, which members referred to as the “hemorrhaging” in public schools.

When John Mac reopened after the storm there were 1,100 students enrolled in the school, none of whose records were available to school administrators in order to place them in the correct grades or with the required special services. About 50 students were over age, and according to Principal Jackson, were a major source of disruption in the school. While some students had attended John Mac prior to the storm, many students were from “rival” neighborhoods and engaged in fighting and other disruptive behaviors. In addition to regular conflicts, students had to deal with cold lunches, problems with transportation to school, and untrained security officers making them feel like “prisoners” in their own school. The school started with 14 teaching vacancies, resulting in some classrooms with up to 40 or 50 students. Finally, teachers had no erasers, very little chalk, and no books with which to teach.

Through their investigation of school conditions at other RSD schools, DNIA Education Committee members discovered that students in other schools were facing similar conditions. They believed a public outcry was necessary to protest these conditions and to create widespread awareness that it was the state’s responsibility to ensure the children of New Orleans would not be forced to go to school in “inhumane conditions,” but receive the high-quality education they deserved. While students in non-RSD schools (schools run by OPSB and charter agencies) seemed to be faring much better than students in RSD schools, which had been perceived to be the “dumping ground” for students with few resources, the DNIA Education Committee wanted to build public awareness of the historical neglect and inequity that had been a part of the New Orleans public schools for nearly two centuries. DNIA Education Committee member Brenda Square explained how their message was not just about accountability by the state after the storm, it was about the state of education and the fate of New Orleans children across the city:

It’s not about the state. It’s about the children who are drowning. Everyday our children are drowning. They’re still in the water at the [Superdome] and they’re up to their necks. So we’ve stepped forward to educate the community about these concerns.

This metaphor reiterates the DNIA Education Committee’s belief in the necessity and urgency for community members to move from apathy to action, appealing to people’s basic instinct to protect children from harm in order to do so.

### **Organizational structure and policies**

#### *Open door policy*

By March 2006, the DNIA Education Committee was meeting on a weekly basis at John Mac and attendance at the weekly meetings had grown. Most people heard about the meetings through word of mouth. Members decided that they wanted to be open to anyone in the city who was interested in talking about public education in the city, not just to residents of the Greater Tremé or members of the DNIA. They also wanted to have an open door policy to avoid



creating a competitive climate between activist groups, which they had heard was a problem in the past within the New Orleans activist community when groups worked in isolation from one another.

### *Community agreements*

Members created “community agreements” to abide by during their meetings and to transition new members into the group. These included agreements to “create a safe space” where all members felt comfortable and respected voicing their opinions and to use “one mic,” which meant only one person could speak at a time. The community agreements were used primarily as a way to maintain order and facilitate dialogue during meetings, but over time they served a broader purpose of building trust and collective identity among members. For example, in January 2007 the DNIA Education Committee invited several public officials to participate in a dialogue with community members and students about the state of public education in New Orleans. DNIA Education Committee members decided to start the conversation by asking everyone to agree to their community agreements. While this was a small act, it symbolized the DNIA Education Committee taking control of that space and the conversation.

While the community agreements play a role in helping to shape group identity, it is unclear how members, new or veteran, are held accountable if they do not abide by the community agreements. At one of the DNIA Education Committee’s regular weekly meetings, this came up as an issue. The DNIA Education Committee had invited a guest to make a presentation to the group about a project she was initiating and seeking support for. A couple of DNIA Education Committee members were upset by some things she said and rudely began to question her presence at the meeting and monopolize conversation. A few other members did not think this behavior was appropriate and reminded everyone to abide by the community agreements. But the meeting ended up dissolving without resolution to the matter and it was unclear how it would be addressed in the future.

### *Consensus-based decision-making*

DNIA Education Committee meetings run anywhere from 3 to 12 hours, depending on whether there is a regular weekly meeting or a special meeting before a big action. One of the reasons for the length is that members value consensus-based decision-making, which requires extensive time for conversation and deliberation. Meetings are run by rotating facilitators who try to keep the conversation focused on the agenda, remind members of the community agreements, and keep time. However, it is not clear to all members how decisions actually get made even though there are structures and policies in place that mandate consensus. One member shared her belief that decisions are not in fact made by consensus, rather they are made by the small group of core members who have the time and ability to do most of the group’s work. While she is not surprised that this dynamic would emerge, she also recognizes it as a problematic aspect of how the group functions.

### *Accountability*

The loose, decentralized organizational structure of the DNIA Education Committee calls into question issues of accountability. The group started out without a formal leader, and members were easily able to make decisions by consensus. However, as the scope of work has grown and the numbers of members increased, the organizational structure has not really changed to meet their new needs. Members did create a steering committee of “key people” who were most active in the group and who could serve as point people to bring together in case a decision needed to be made quicker than would be possible to convene the entire DNIA Education Committee membership, but it is unclear what the lines of communication are between these key people and the rest of the group and how the steering committee is held accountable by the general membership.

### **Key activities and processes**

#### *Youth forums and creation of the Fyre Youth Squad*

Once their list of goals had been prioritized, the DNIA Education Committee decided it would work toward their goal of youth empowerment by hosting a series of youth forums in June and July of 2006. Three young people and a subcommittee of adult members of the DNIA Education Committee planned the first forum. The first youth forum, titled the “I Have a Dream” School Youth Forum, was held on June 17, 2006 at Clark High School, an RSD-run high school. About ten current and former Orleans Parish students attended the forum where they were encouraged to think about the kinds of characteristics they hoped the reopened public schools in New Orleans would possess. They talked about issues such as discipline, relationships between teachers and students, and after school activities.

The second youth forum, titled the “Community Open Mic” Youth Forum, was held on July 15, 2006 and built upon the success of the first youth forum. More young people were involved in the planning of this forum to make the event even more youth-driven than the first. The goal of this forum was to create a youth advisory body to represent the voice of youth across the city pertaining to the rebuilding of public schools.

The Fyre Youth Squad (FYS) emerged out of the second youth forum to be this youth advisory body. It started out with just a couple of members and as of January 2007 had increased to 22 members representing at least five schools across the city. FYS holds its own weekly meetings and is supported by a small group of adult supporters who are members of the DNIA Education Committee.

While the DNIA Education Committee does not explicitly outline leadership development as a key process for its work, there are clear examples of leadership development that occur within the FYS. The principal of John Mac, Donald Jackson, observed changes among the FYS members in terms of how much they had improved their public speaking skills since the beginning of the year. In addition, FYS members themselves believed that by being a part of FYS they were leaders for their peers. One FYS member described who he felt FYS members represented through their advocacy:

We're not representing ourselves. We're representing everybody who's been mistreated in schools. We're representing the majority of the dropouts, the people who think about dropping out, the people who are having trouble in school, the hard working kids that get A's and B's on their report cards. That's who we're representing. We're representing our children in our neighborhood. We're representing children in middle schools and elementary schools. That's who we're fighting for and that's who we represent.

While each FYS member spoke about their identities as leaders, they also hoped for increased opportunities to develop skills through the FYS including improving their public speaking skills, building confidence, and getting academic support to help them balance their extracurricular leadership with academic success.

### *Creation of a local community board and a shared governance agreement with the state*

By the summer of 2006, DNIA Education Committee members were getting concerned about the need for schools to be open for the 2006-2007 school year to accommodate the number of young people who were back in the city with no place to go. While they wanted to see more schools open across the city, they focused their immediate attention on John Mac, which was located within the DNIA's boundaries.

John Mac has served young people in Tremé for generations. In 2004-2005 school year, there were 1,140 students in grades 8-12 of which 99% were black and 63% were eligible for free/reduced price lunch (NCES). In July 2006, the RSD announced that John Mac, along with 16 other public schools that formerly were in the Orleans Parish School District, would reopen as an RSD school in October 2006. When DNIA Education Committee members heard this announcement they wanted to ensure that the school would reopen as a community-centered school, one that was responsive to the local community's needs. They felt that it would probably be difficult for the state to stay connected to local needs from Baton Rouge, so they started to talk about creating a community board to work in partnership with the state.

The DNIA Education Committee members believed that if they could create a model of a high quality open enrollment school at John Mac, one of the lowest performing schools in New Orleans before the storm, they could play a part in improving public education across the city. They believed that shared governance was the way to achieve this goal because neither community members nor the state had everything each needed in order to best serve the needs of the young people. They also believed in their own responsibility to do the difficult work of educational design and planning. DNIA Education Committee member Broderick Webb described this philosophy:

We want to construct something, not just deconstruct. You don't want to just be critical of what's wrong. There's been something wrong with this for hundreds of years. And we can't just wait for government to be responsive. What we have to do is build with our own hands if necessary a school system that works for us.

The DNIA Education Committee started a John Mac proposal committee to work on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to propose to the RSD Superintendent Robin Jarvis. The MOU outlined the basic principles of a partnership with the state including collectively developing short and long term goals and objectives, school policies, and instructional focus for the school. Members submitted the MOU in August 2006. Their hope was to get the agreement in place before school started in October, use the 2006-2007 school year for planning, and begin implementation in the school's second year. Jarvis did not respond for several months due to legal issues the MOU introduced, and when she did respond she suggested that the DNIA Education Committee apply to convert John Mac into a charter school. Since the DNIA Education Committee was not interested in sponsoring a charter school, they became stalled on this goal. In the meantime, school had started and the DNIA Education Committee started to observe the conditions in schools and temporarily put the MOU on hold while they pursued their advocacy and media work.

Whether or not the partnership with the state would become formalized, the DNIA Education Committee knew they wanted to hold a series of community education workshops in order to build interest and knowledge by parents and community members for designing a community-centered school. They were not exactly sure what the workshops would entail substantively, but members knew that there was a lack of collective vision of what public education *could* look like in New Orleans and there was a lack of exposure to models from around the world they could learn from in order to think about how this idea of a community-centered school could possibly look like. Due to the demands the advocacy work has started to take up by December 2006, the first community education workshop has been pushed back at least twice. It was initially planned for the end of January 2007 and has been rescheduled for May 2007.

The community education workshops, if implemented, would follow along the leadership development strand that the work with the FYS has started. Then, the DNIA Education Committee would have leadership development opportunities for both youth and adults. This internally-focused work would also balance the externally-focused work of holding decision-makers accountable through protest and public pressure.

#### *Press conferences and public pressure on government officials*

As previously described, the DNIA Education Committee and Fyre Youth Squad observed that students around the city, especially in RSD schools, were going to school under "inhumane conditions." Concerned that there was no public outcry about these conditions, the DNIA Education Committee started to hold press conferences in collaboration with the Fyre Youth Squad to increase awareness of the state of public education and hold RSD and BESE officials accountable for immediately providing all young people with a high quality education.

From October 2006 to January 2007 the FYS held one press conference and the DNIA Education Committee held three press conferences. All but one of the press conferences were held at RSD schools. At each press conference, members made statements about a particular issue and presented demands to the RSD and BESE. Demands have addressed logistical issues (e.g.

getting bus passes to get to school), instructional issues (e.g. securing additional certified teachers), and safety issues (e.g. getting rid of untrained security officers who harass students).

All of the press conferences were orchestrated to relay a carefully crafted message. Members believed the value of press conferences was that “you control the message.” In addition to controlling the message, the use of the media was also a strategy to leverage influence over decision-making by state officials. Webb explained:

It’s a way that we can craft our message... and make sure that when we communicate to...the BESE Board or ...the governor...or the RSD...what we have said isn’t just said behind closed doors where it can be ignored or distorted...If we do a good job of involving the media at critical moments...then it’s harder for them to want to ignore us. It puts pressure on them to do something.

DNIA Education Committee members have been affirmed that their message is reaching the public because after their press conferences they receive phone calls from community members and participation at meetings. However, the local newspaper, the Times-Picayune, has only covered their events once, and that was likely a result of the presence of celebrity Bill Cosby.

## **Conclusion**

The goals of the DNIA Education Committee map right onto the key concepts laid out in Chapter 1. By focusing on youth empowerment, the DNIA Education Committee supported young people, the primary stakeholders impacted by decisions about schools, to be involved in deciding what they wanted schools to look like. In addition, youth empowerment led to two very important civic engagement outcomes. First, by focusing on the need for youth empowerment, the DNIA Education Committee attracted adults who instinctually felt the desire to nurture and protect children. This essentially created an avenue for adults to be engaged in education advocacy work who might not have otherwise. Second, the incorporation of leadership development offered youth the opportunity to learn skills that would not only help them to fulfill their current responsibilities as members of the FYS, but would enable them to effectively participate and be leaders in their communities in the future.

The DNIA Education Committee’s emphasis on building a community-centered school represents a response to the charter school model of school governance. As previously discussed, charter schools have become a popular policy option within the wider discourse of urban school reform. However, because charter schools in New Orleans were unable to meet the needs of all students, especially those with the fewest resources, the DNIA Education Committee saw charter schools as an inequitable option to achieve high quality schools. While they sought to achieve the local control charter schools promised through a community board proposal, they also wanted to ensure that government was not left unaccountable for guaranteeing high quality education to all students.

The DNIA Education Committee’s pursuit of their third goal of advocacy for “world class, community-centered” schools citywide is an attempt to bring equity and excellence into closer alignment within the school reform discourse in New Orleans. After observing how high quality

**schools were not equally accessible to all students in the city, DNIA Education Committee members believed they needed to play a role in reframing how the public and state officials envisioned the school rebuilding process.**

**Given these goals and processes, what role is the DNIA Education Committee as an organization currently playing and likely to play in the future to rebuild public education in the city? For now, the group serves to inform community members and provide concrete opportunities for action to address the immediate concerns of students and their families. The group continues to evolve, and just as they have focused more on their advocacy work than their organizing work in their first year, they may shift gears and decide to work more collaboratively with the state or focus more heavily on building community capacity in the future. Though their future direction is uncertain, their most important role so far as been to lay the foundation for New Orleanians, especially those who have suffered inequitable conditions in schools, to come together and develop an alternative vision for rebuilding public education to the vision proposed by the state. The next chapter will delve further into these issues of the group's evolving purpose and power.**

## 4. Purpose and power

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### Introduction

Amidst the chaos of rebuilding and the emergence of so many new and reinvigorated community organizations clamoring to have their voices heard, how does any one group make the transition from being just another group of well-intentioned people to a community with the capacity to achieve its goals? In the case of the DNIA Education Committee, we can begin to answer this question by exploring how members developed a shared sense of purpose and power and then translated it into a vision they believed would promote educational equity in New Orleans public schools.

This chapter will begin by describing two places from which the DNIA Education Committee's shared sense of purpose evolved. First, the political moment in time when the group emerged created an unprecedented window of opportunity for ordinary people who had previously not been organized or held an education reform agenda to unite and have their voice heard. Second, each individual who joined the DNIA Education Committee had a deep belief in their own efficacy and the possibility of a future public education system that looked radically different than it did before the storm.

After delving into the evolution of the group's shared sense of purpose, I will explore the two primary conceptions of power that members shared: 1) power as *sense of empowerment*, meaning helping individuals to feel a sense of efficacy in their ability to voice their concerns and take control over their lives and 2) power as *the power to get things done*, emphasizing the influence the group has on decision-makers and the outcomes it cares about. The DNIA Education Committee's shared sense of purpose and power culminate into an alternative vision to the state's vision for how New Orleans public schools should be rebuilt. However, also embedded within this alternative vision are key choices the group made that have implications for how much power the group has actually been able to leverage to achieve its goals. These key choices include working in isolation from other groups who may have shared similar goals, choosing not to sponsor a charter school, and opting to pursue pressure tactics without offering an alternative plan.

### Developing a shared sense of purpose

*Why act now?*

It did not take long for public officials at all levels of government to attribute “opportunity” to the aftermath of the storm. On November 9, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco gave a speech proposing the state take over most of the schools in Orleans Parish:

It took the storm of a lifetime, to create the opportunity of a lifetime... That's why I'm proposing that the state take control and re-create the schools in Orleans Parish... now is the time to act, now is the time to think out of the box and now is the time to turn a failing system into a model for the nation.

Many of the DNIA Education Committee members also recognized the significance of this particular moment in time. One member stated:

The storm razed the land and left the fertile land. Now we can plant seeds. Everything has to be rebuilt. So that means in every area people have the optimism that they can rebuild it better.

While few of the DNIA Education Committee members had been actively involved in education advocacy or organizing prior to the storm, the storm opened up an opportunity to participate in education reform that some members felt did not exist before. Liberty Rashad, a newcomer to New Orleans whose past experience was in alternative, experiential education, described her personal experience with gaining entry into education work in the city prior to the storm:

I had always wanted to do [education work] here but there was never a way for me to get in. It was a very closed world....The way the New Orleans public school system worked was a little domain of people who – that was their thing. And I didn't teach, I was never a teacher...and so it wasn't like an open door policy...This was a place where people gave jobs to the people they knew and they wanted give access to and I was definitely not one of those people. I was a newcomer and I just didn't have the right credentials.

Many DNIA Education Committee members were also acutely aware that the aftermath of the storm represented a “historic moment.” For example, DNIA Education Committee member Brenda Square had experienced Hurricane Betsy when she was a child in the Lower Ninth Ward in 1965. Her memories of being up to her neck in water, trying to survive, and then witnessing the aftermath of rebuilding, are ingrained in her mind and understanding of what is going on now.

### *Motivation for involvement in education advocacy*

While the window of opportunity created by Hurricane Katrina could have prompted individuals to engage with any number of issues related to rebuilding including housing, transportation, or economic development, there were two main reasons why DNIA Education Committee members were drawn to education. First, most members, whether they were parents, teachers, administrators, or not, expressed a deep connection and responsibility for children, especially children with few resources or supports to advocate for them. Second, most members expressed a belief in the intrinsic connection between schools and communities, especially the critical need



for schools to be rebuilt in order for residents to return. While members joined the group at different times and with varying levels of commitment, it was one of these two factors that explain their underlying motivation for joining. In addition to these overarching factors, members expressed more specific reasons for joining an education advocacy organization.

- *Teachers and administrators as critical bridges between school and community*

Perhaps because their professional lives were based in John Mac, one of the initial reasons teachers and administrators gave for joining the DNIA Education Committee focused on the reopening of John Mac as a community-centered school. Audrey Tuckerson, a 30-year veteran teacher, expressed how he felt before the RSD decided to reopen John Mac:

It was a situation where I felt as though the Recovery District was not going to listen to us if we did not continue to fight to open the school. So, I actually called on some of my other colleagues to garner support to help us get our...concerns heard as to how important John McDonogh is to all of us, as well as our students. Because we would see our kids in the shopping center, see our kids at the movie theater and they wanted their school back, you know, they wanted to come back to John McDonogh. So we felt that we really, really had to fight [to get] this school open.

Another motivating factor for teachers and administrators to join was the desire to create a bridge between the school and community. Jamila Wilson began working with the DNIA Education Committee as a City Year Corps Member until January 2007 when she started to work as a full-time teacher at John Mac. She shared her perspective on the role of teachers within the DNIA Education Committee:

[T]heoretically the role of teachers in the DNIA [Education Committee] is so important because they're the ones that are right there working with these students. They are the access, other than the key to the door, to and for the DNIA [Education Committee] to come into the schools to be a resource...[Teachers] have to be at the table making sure that... the community is welcome...So they're amazingly important...they're kind of that technical backbone for the community understanding the needs of the students.

Principal Jackson echoed the sentiment that teachers and administrators who work in the school and who are familiar with the day-to-day reality of the school possess the knowledge and perspective essential for the DNIA Education Committee to be effective in its agenda setting and action. He spoke about his function within the DNIA Education Committee as the school leader of John Mac:

[My role is] as an advisor and someone who can continue to reinforce the vision I have for school in light of [the DNIA Education Committee's] agendas...When I was meeting with them earlier I had to refocus their attention on some of the key issues...One of those key issues is getting support services for the students

...Some of [the DNIA Education Committee] wanted to disband security all together but you can't do that because you do need a security presence.

Given how important teachers and administrators are to the effectiveness of the DNIA Education Committee, most members of the group agreed that they need to focus more on recruiting more of them to the group.

- *The need for organizing in vulnerable communities; schools as centers of neighborhoods*

Other DNIA Education Committee members talked about needing to help vulnerable populations get their voice heard and to advocate for a vision where schools were more deeply connected to community building. DNIA Education Committee member Brenda Square talked about how spreading awareness of the situation and organizing within the community was necessary to stop educational inequity:

If the people aren't able to organize and say what they want for this community and make demands, we will have a Jim Crow school system....We need to make our community aware of what's happening. Most people, if they knew what was happening, they would do something.

DNIA Education Committee member Torin Sanders emphasized the importance of schools as centers of neighborhoods:

Schools are everything...They have the potential – that potential wasn't reached in New Orleans pre-Katrina – to be the primary community centers, the community hub. Hopefully what will come out of the rebuilding is...a vision, where schools have libraries and health clinics attached directly to them....where schools are seen as the central points in a neighborhood and... the cohesion for the neighborhood.

All of the motivating factors described above culminate into a collective purpose of the DNIA Education Committee. Of course, a shared sense of purpose is not enough for a group to achieve its goals, for goals alone do not make change. In order to effect change, advocacy groups must be able to influence decision making processes. Thus, members must also share a perspective on power – how to define it, get it, and use it.

### **Developing a shared sense of power**

Ultimately, the DNIA Education Committee is a group of people who want to effect change and get things done. Amidst the diversity of opinions about where their power comes from and how they have been able to leverage it to accomplish their goals, DNIA Education Committee members talked about their power in two main ways: 1) the empowerment of community members to have a voice and tell their own story, and 2) the power to get things done.

#### *Empowerment*

As described in the previous chapter, the DNIA Education Committee utilized the media to make public their message about educational inequity. While their primary strategy was to put pressure on government to respond to their demands, they also hoped that by making their message public, they would instill the belief that individual community members had the power to affect and change their own reality.

The support of the FYS by the DNIA Education Committee is the clearest example of the group's focus on empowerment. One FYS member shared how being a part of the FYS has empowered youth to shift perceptions of young black people from a negative to a positive image:

We want to make something happen instead of being the “lazy black folks” we’re known for. We just want to make something happen. Especially for the youth. They always talk about the “failing generation”...we want to say we’re proving society wrong.

While surprisingly few DNIA Education Committee members explicitly talked about race and class when describing their work, many of their comments implied a belief that the people who needed to be empowered were poor and black people. DNIA Education Committee member Broderick Webb described how many community members felt after witnessing the poor conditions at John Mac when it first reopened after the storm:

If the faces in that school were primarily white, this would not be happening. But [RSD schools have] become the dumping ground for poor, less well-heeled people, which in New Orleans means black people.

DNIA Education Committee member Walter Goodwin furthered this analysis by highlighting the disparity in resources between families whose children attend the RSD schools versus the schools with reputations for being of higher quality:

The RSD...buildings are...dilapidated. You wouldn't want your child to go into those buildings...Lusher, Ben Franklin, your magnet schools – they're not going to look like [RSD] schools. Parents are not going to stand for it... They have muscle... They are educated...They're going to push for what it is right... They know how to fight because they have lawyers...We don't have that.

The DNIA Education Committee used this basic power analysis, that there were “haves” and “have-nots” in the city, to define who they believed they represented and sought to empower. But a few members were unsure about how well the group represented all the stakeholders impacted by educational inequity. One DNIA member described the challenge of moving beyond garnering media attention to building a representative base of membership:

I think the challenge is getting other voices that...are the real stakeholders. And not that community members and long time activists aren't real stakeholders, but at the same time is that really building a movement? No. Just because you can get 50 activists to an event doesn't mean you're building a movement...We can't assume we're providing solutions that other people want...because we haven't

made an effort to really reach out and find out what people are thinking and wanting. And I think that's ultimately the next big hurdle. We've gotten all this attention. We've managed to leverage a lot of power just because what we've done hasn't been done before.

Interestingly, members spoke passionately about the desire to empower individuals to voice their opinions and be heard, yet by their own analysis they fell short of fully exerting influence in this way. While members seemed to focus on the lack of representation within their base a factor limiting their power to empower, they did not seem to pay the same amount of attention to the fact that they were working in isolation from other groups who may have shared similar goals and strategies, including the organization from which it evolved – the DNIA. By choosing to work as a single organization rather than one organization within a strategic alliance of organizations, the group made a tradeoff between deepening empowerment of a smaller number of people and broadening empowerment to a greater number of people.

### *Power to get things done*

An FYS member summarized the dual approach to building power that the DNIA Education Committee applied to their work:

We have to get power to *do* something, not power to *own* something...I mean, we own *ourselves* and bring *ourselves* up as we go to each meeting and each meeting after that.

Focusing on young people turned out not only to be about empowerment, but it was also a strategic move in order to be taken more seriously by the powers that be. Rashad explained how the voice and demands of young people carried a certain undeniability, or legitimacy, that adults saying the same things did not have:

For some reason it's almost like a human instinct that when babies cry you pay attention. When children cry we still have that nurturing, human instinct to take care of our young. And somehow that's part of why them speaking out – they're still young enough to be cared for. Maybe when they get to be college students it will be – those radicals! But right now they're still the babies. And people care. How can we harm the babies?...How can you deny them? And so by them saying, 'we've been abandoned, we are denied, we are neglected, we are mistreated, this is unjust and unfair, who can argue with that? There's no argument.

While it is still early to make any final judgments about the potential impacts the DNIA Education Committee will make in public education in New Orleans, the group has been credited with calling attention to poor school conditions and the lack of student services, which has resulted in those issues being addressed faster than if the group had not been as active with their media campaign. Perhaps their most victorious moment thus far was in January 2007 when the BESE agreed to all of their demands (regarding a reduction in student to teacher ratio, reduction in security guards and increase in social workers and guidance counselors, compliance with laws for special education, and elimination of the high-stakes portion of the LEAP test). After the

DNIA Education Committee and FYS members presented their demands to the BESE, BESE members agreed with the demands. However, this agreement lacked any “teeth.” The BESE requested a report from the RSD within a month’s time about its progress toward meeting the demands, but it did not define any accountability measures if the RSD reported that for whatever reason they were not able to meet the DNIA Education Committee’s demands.

At least one DNIA Education Committee member did not believe that the BESE’s concession was a legitimate form of power. He explained:

[R]ight now we have no power, we’re strictly a pressure group. We use the media and we use the relationships politically to try to get issues addressed but not in any authoritative way since we don’t have a role in formal way. Whether we like or not we’re just a group of interested citizens as opposed to an educational entity that has some muscle.

This idea of power as formal decision-making authority echoes the DNIA Education Committee’s goal of creating a community board for John Mac. Members felt that if they wanted to exert their influence over the direction of the school, the most effective way to do that would be to create this board in partnership with the state. However, the group did not get agreement from the state to create the board. Since they had previously given up the opportunity to transform John Mac into a charter school based on ideological grounds, members in effect gave up an opportunity to gain formal decision-making authority. While it is clear that members were unified in their critique of charter schools, it is unclear if members perceived their rejection of the chance to start a charter school as a tradeoff between values and power. It appears that the DNIA Education Committee was not willing to pursue power by any means necessary; they were guided by their values, particularly their commitment to equity.

A final aspect of how the DNIA Education Committee thinks about its power has to do with capacity. When the group first identified its goals, members believed they were realistic to accomplish. However, as they got further into their work, the physical and emotional drain on people started to take a toll. While the group has attracted over a hundred individuals to its meetings, the majority of the work is done by a small group of core members. One member acknowledged how the group’s limited capacity might impact their ability to achieve their goals:

I think that some of the things that we want, like John Mac becoming a community school, we don’t have the capacity to actually facilitate that happening.

While capacity can refer to a number of things, including numbers of people, skills, expertise, financial resources, and relationships, this member appears to be referring to the group’s inexperience with designing a school from the ground up and with education policy in general.

### **Developing an alternative vision for the future**

As described in Chapter 3, the DNIA Education Committee works toward three main goals: 1) youth empowerment, 2) creation of a community-centered school, and 3) advocacy for “world

class, community centered” schools citywide. The choices they have made and actions they have designed in pursuit of these goals culminate into a specific theory of change for rebuilding public education in New Orleans. This theory of change contrasts to how the state proposed to rebuild public education regarding the pacing and sequencing of rebuilding, and the role and form of community participation in the rebuilding process.

### *Pacing and sequencing of rebuilding schools as it relates to repopulation*

When the RSD gained control of over 100 schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, it was faced with numerous challenges related to the physical rebuilding of school facilities. Eighty percent of school buildings were either damaged or destroyed in the storm, a majority of which had pre-existing maintenance needs that required attention. FEMA funding was granted to repair buildings, but it could only be spent on hurricane-related damages. The RSD had to determine how to maximize FEMA funds while also paying attention to the years of neglect that many school buildings had suffered. Another decision the RSD had to make was how to think about rebuilding schools within the context of the district plans that were being developed through the UNOP process. According to RSD Superintendent Robin Jarvis, the RSD planned to start working with an educational planner, neighborhood groups, and OPSB to look at the projected demographics of the city, understand what community members envisioned for their schools, and figure out where to strategically locate schools so that the locally-driven visions for schools could be matched with the appropriate facility.

Throughout this process of physical rebuilding the RSD also had to figure out how it would operate the RSD schools in New Orleans from Baton Rouge, address the diversity of community concerns and demands, and deal with the politics of decision-making when federal, state, and local players are all invested stakeholders. Considering the complexity of the decisions RSD had to make and the desire to be strategic in its planning, the RSD believed it was important to take the time necessary to make the best decisions possible for the future of New Orleans schools. Jarvis, who expressed her awareness that “nothing is fast in recovery is nothing is fast enough,” also proceeded with the assumption that the investment of time now would lead to better results overall in the long-run:

We have the opportunity to rebuild an infrastructure in education that I don't think any other urban school district has ever had. It's going to take patience... Some schools are going to get torn down and never rebuilt...or at least not rebuilt for another 5 or 6 years. Maybe somewhere down the road there's a need for a school there and it's rebuilt...those are going to be hard conversations for the community to have.

From the DNIA Education Committee's perspective, the RSD's plan of working with an educational planner on a comprehensive school rebuilding plan did not come soon enough. They felt the urgency to have children in better schools. They also believed that opening schools was vital to repopulating the city and rebuilding communities. The RSD's slow response was also perceived by some members as a deliberate attempt to keep certain populations – poor people and poor people of color – out of the city. DNIA Education Committee member Bob Tannen

explained what he called the “chicken and egg” problem of sequencing the rebuilding of schools with bringing back residents:

It was apparent, whether it was a conscious coordinated effort or not, [that] public services were being shut down. Public schools were shut down, public housing was shut down...So one could conclude that it was either a conscious assumption that the city would be different in the future, with less of a need for public services if one assumed that there would be fewer poor people. But it's a chicken and egg problem. There would be fewer poor people if you don't have public services and public support system for them. And I think many people in this community, black and white, unfortunately took the view that maybe poor people are better off in other cities that can support them more easily than New Orleans can, New Orleans being a poor city. That's not our view.

### *The role and forms of community participation in the rebuilding process*

In an attempt to be responsive to community concerns about which schools would be reopening, where, and when, RSD Superintendent Jarvis sat down with “just about every group” who requested a meeting with her, from neighborhood associations to individual residents in their living rooms. While Jarvis acknowledged that she has not been able to respond as quickly as she would like to community members’ concerns, she said she valued hearing from community members. She hoped that through an “open discussion” with community groups from around the city, the RSD would better understand local communities’ visions for their neighborhood schools.

While community members providing input into a citywide plan is one form of community participation, the DNIA Education Committee has adopted a different form of participation, one that they believe can be more influential in the RSD’s decision-making process. DNIA Education Committee member Liberty Rashad explained:

I think the more we yell and scream and more we get media attention, the more we spread the word about what we think and what’s going on, I think they feel the pressure. And the more they feel the pressure the more they have to react. The squeaky wheel – I think that’s what our role is. And no matter what, we just have to keep squeaking louder and louder and if it comes to suing people – whatever it takes! I think we have to keep pushing. They now begin to say, wait a minute – these people are not stopping. They’re serious. I think they begin to realize...we’re serious. We’re not just a little – “oh, they had a rally, oh they had a youth forum, oh, isn’t that nice?” I think now they’re beginning to say wait a minute, what have they got going?

To the DNIA Education Committee, community input into a citywide plan and local control over one school were important but not sufficient. Members acted upon the assumption that they would be most effective if they held government accountable for delivering public education for all children by working in partnership with ensuring that schools would be based on a local vision. However, the DNIA Education Committee chose to advocate for this stance solely

through the “squeaky wheel” route rather than bolstering their pressure tactics with an alternative plan. This illustrates a tradeoff between voice and decision-making. By emphasizing the need to get its message heard, and focusing its limited time and energy on press conferences and media campaigns, the DNIA Education Committee seems to have sacrificed some ability to engage in “behind-the-scenes” decision-making, which likely would have taken the group out of the spotlight for some time.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explained why the DNIA Education Committee members were motivated to act in response to educational inequity, how they perceived the power of their actions in relation to achieving their ultimate goals, and the alternative vision they developed in contrast to the state’s vision of rebuilding schools. The DNIA Education Committee succeeded in developing a strong sense of commitment by its members to work collectively toward a shared goal. However, it is unclear how much attention they have paid to weighing all the options available to them in order to achieve their goals. There is nothing inherently wrong with the choices they have made (e.g. deepening empowerment of a smaller number of people vs. broadening empowerment to a greater number of people, sticking to values vs. pursuing power by any means necessary, and prioritizing voice vs. decision-making authority). In fact, they may have been exactly the right choices made at the right time. But the limits of those choices may not be evident to the organizers. In order to maximize their effectiveness, the DNIA Education Committee must make additional strategic choices on the path to equity-oriented reform. Those choices include alliances beyond the DNIA Education Committee, how to go from values-driven vision to actionable plan, and how to continue constituency building, in part through capacity building, at the base. The final chapter will synthesize the major lessons about civic engagement learned from the case of the DNIA Education Committee and make recommendations to the group about how civic engagement can empower ordinary people to be change agents in their communities.



## 5. Implications for planning

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The case of the DNIA Education Committee tells an important story about civic engagement after a disaster. One of the DNIA Education Committee's first goals as an organized group of citizens concerned about schools was to create a community board for John Mac. However, their focus on governance was not sufficient to be viewed by the state as anything other than one of a hundred voices in a sea of community groups. Even though it was true that neither the state nor community groups could address a challenge as large as rebuilding public schools single-handedly, by not explicitly addressing the historical mistrust between them, they were unable to sit around the same table to collaborate effectively. Not surprisingly, mistrust and misperception complicated the tensions associated with *unequal power* to effect change—a commonplace in public life.

Even if state officials believed they had taken into account the representative interests of the community in developing solutions (e.g. charter schools) to rebuilding public education, it does not appear that they took into consideration the fact that after Hurricane Katrina many individuals' conception of their self-interest expanded. After the storm many community members saw schools as fundamentally connected to larger social equity issues, and therefore believed educational equity needed to be at the forefront of a rebuilding plan. Since community members did not perceive educational equity to be at the forefront of the rebuilding agenda proposed by the state, they were put in a position of needing to create their own message and build a political will for equity-oriented reform that would shift the dominant discourse in a new direction.

In this chapter I delve deeper into this narrative, synthesizing the lessons learned from the case study in light of relevant literature and historical context. I will also recap my case analysis, utilizing the lens of community capacity. I will conclude with recommendations to the DNIA Education Committee and final thoughts.

### **Lessons learned**

#### *Opportunity for collaboration*

As one DNIA Education Committee member recounted the number of actions the DNIA Education Committee had implemented over the course of several months, she incredulously asked, "Can't they see that we want to *help*?" The "they" in her question refers to the RSD Superintendent and the BESE, the two primary entities the DNIA Education Committee believed

needed to be held accountable by citizens to provide all children with a high quality public education. The DNIA Education Committee did not believe that it was being recognized for the collaborative role they wanted to play with the state. One DNIA Education Committee member summarized the group's philosophy on collaboration:

We think you need to be working internally and externally. We're not in control of everything so there's a necessity to work with external forces...We're not here to just hear ourselves talk or beat our chests. We didn't want to just be a march and rally group. Protest is limited as to what it can do to addressing the long term needs...Robin Jarvis is not our enemy. Unjust schools are our enemy.

In spite of the DNIA Education Committee believing in this philosophy, when asked about the influence the group has had on her decision-making, RSD Superintendent Robin Jarvis replied:

Most of [the DNIA Education Committee's] concerns have been valid concerns. Do I agree with the way they go about them? Not necessarily...I haven't gotten a sense that we can sit down and say – here are our obstacles and here's what we're going through. And maybe we just haven't done it. But I haven't felt like I could sit down with them...We have to come to the table ready to problem solve together... We need to sit down with them and have a conversation about creating a better, working relationship. Is that what they're willing to do?

In this example, it seems that both the DNIA Education Committee and the RSD Superintendent desired a more collaborative relationship, but in the absence of a foundation from which to nurture collaboration, each party defaulted to behavior that perpetuated the status quo of relationships between decision-makers and ordinary citizens; that of unequal power, mistrust, and antagonism. These dynamics obscured the need to openly communicate about the specific mechanism for community engagement in schools that the state supported – community sponsorship of charter schools. From the state's perspective, this mechanism fulfilled its practical need to get schools open quickly while also offering community groups the opportunity to locally drive school-based decision-making. However, from the DNIA Education Committee's perspective, this mechanism did not fulfill its need for government to be actively involved in the governance of schools, prompting the group to propose the community board idea. It appears that both parties missed an opportunity for collaboration because neither believed it was possible or knew how to invent an option for collaboration that addressed their different needs while meeting their shared goals.

#### *Expanded conceptions of self-interest*

Displacement and relocation of residents is an inevitable result of a disaster that strikes a city at the scale that Hurricane Katrina did. New Orleans' unique vulnerability, and the massive flooding, produced dislocation on a much greater scale, and relocation of much greater duration, than most disasters that have hit American cities. These features make the case even more extreme and revelatory, though not necessarily predictive of disaster recovery everywhere.

But what happens when residents return is just as striking. In the case of the DNIA Education

Committee, residents returned to find their very survival intrinsically connected to, and indeed dependent on, how public institutions and infrastructure would be rebuilt. From housing to health care to public safety, residents' sense of interconnectedness to their environment and awareness of government's role to protect the common good was heightened compared to before the storm. Community organizing literature argues that those with the most direct interest in an issue must be the most active participants in fighting for their own rights, rather than have others advocate for them. While most DNIA Education Committee members would not traditionally be considered the primary stakeholders in the struggle for educational equity, there is something to be said about their own perception of their stake and their willingness to not just push for change, but to take responsibility for creating change themselves. While almost all DNIA Education Committee members recognized the need to bring more teachers and parents into the group in order to be more representative as well as gain legitimacy, they were in fact already engaged in legitimate action because they saw themselves as primary stakeholders with regards to the issue of educational equity.

The expansion of self-interest among community members happened organically on an instinctual level. As a result, many members might not have even been aware that their actions were based upon a renewed sense of self and purpose after the storm. Had members collectively been able to articulate through their media campaigns and their messages to the state what the significance was of community members as "non-traditional" stakeholders taking a stand against educational inequity, they may have been able to distinguish themselves as a group with an undeniable stake who must not be ignored.

### *Emergence of a political will to promote an alternative plan*

Every plan to rebuild an institution, infrastructure, or city has implied values. In the case of the DNIA Education Committee, ordinary citizens' perception of the state's plan to rebuild schools did not include the values they believed were most important: authentic community decision-making power, government accountability, and equity. Their first instinct to bringing their values to the forefront was to try and work in partnership with the state and create a local community board for John Mac. But when members did not receive a favorable response, they lost momentum. The DNIA Education Committee was one of many organizations to have emerged after the storm, and perhaps the only one focused exclusively on citywide educational equity, yet they were not prepared to translate their alternative vision into a feasible plan.

If the DNIA Education Committee had fleshed out their concept of what a community-centered school at John Mac would look like or what "world-class, community centered" schools across the city would look like, they might have created more opportunities for dialogue than with values and principles alone.

### **Recap: Through the lens of building community capacity**

At the beginning of this paper I introduced the idea that civic engagement from below could transform ordinary people into agents of change within public decision-making, and not merely as recipients of services or providers of input in top-down approaches to reform. In the 18 months following Hurricane Katrina, the DNIA Education Committee functioned as a vehicle for

civic engagement from below by starting out as an ad hoc group that attracted disparate individuals who shared common values and interests around public education in New Orleans. The group has gradually evolved into a viable community with clear goals, processes, and successes. However, the group has not yet transformed ordinary people into authentic decision-makers on a significant scale. In order to make this transition, the DNIA Education Committee will have to focus more on developing the characteristics of community capacity they are currently lacking.

Chaskin, et al. (2001) define community capacity in its simplest form as what makes a community “work.” The authors define four characteristics of community capacity that collectively enable a community to achieve certain *outcomes* (e.g. educational equity) through particular *processes* (e.g. advocacy, planning, governance) given a set of *conditioning influences* (e.g. distribution of power and resources, race and class dynamics). These four characteristics are: 1) sense of community, 2) commitment to the community and its members, 3) ability to solve problems, and 4) access to resources.

In Chapter 2 I addressed the influences conditioning the DNIA Education Committee’s community capacity. These included historical inequity and neglect of public education for blacks and the centralization of state power to make decisions about public education in New Orleans. These are factors that influence the DNIA Education Committee’s ability to develop their capacity, but which they have little control over. On the other hand, these inequities were also targets for mobilization, part of the group’s motivating story.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the goals and key processes of the DNIA Education Committee. The group identified three goals: youth empowerment, creation of a community-centered school, and advocacy for “world class, community-centered” education citywide. Members worked toward these goals through the use of media and pressure tactics, leadership development (particularly for youth), and the development of consistent organizational policies that would enable them to function effectively. These goals and processes represent the group’s focus on advocacy and governance as their primary strategies to reach their ultimate vision of educational equity in New Orleans public schools. The group has been strongest in their advocacy work but they also have been slowly creating a foundation to prepare them to be more actively engaged in governance (e.g. through decision-making about the direction of John Mac) and planning (e.g. translating their values and principles of equity-oriented school reform into an actionable plan). Through the ongoing support of the Fyre Youth Squad, implementation of community education workshops, and focus on the creation of an alternative plan, the DNIA Education Committee will utilize multiple processes to achieve their goals, thereby increasing their community capacity.

In Chapter 4 I discussed the DNIA Education Committee’s sense of shared purpose and power, but not through the specific lens of community capacity. The following section describes the DNIA Education Committee’s levels of community capacity, from highest to lowest.

### *Commitment*

The DNIA Education Committee possesses a high level of commitment. Members strongly expressed a responsibility to their community and have been more than willing to actively engage as stakeholders around the issue of public education in New Orleans.

### *Sense of community*

Members of the DNIA Education Committee appear to have an important but limited sense of community. Members were bound together tightly by the shared experience of surviving Hurricane Katrina, shared values around equity, and a shared purpose of holding government accountable for delivering high-quality education to all children. At the same time, individual members were not necessarily tied together by everyday relationships the way that neighbors or family members are. It was noteworthy, to me, that they knew little about each other's "stories" as people, for example, or even each other's work lives beyond the movement.

### *Access to resources*

The DNIA Education Committee has some clear access to resources, again with important limits. In terms of networks and visibility, the group has had regular contact with the RSD Superintendent and BESE Board members, participation of celebrity Bill Cosby in a press conference, and "expert" guidance from educators and researchers from across the country. However, the group has been limited in their access to local resources, including knowledge and constituencies. First, the group lacks knowledge of other organizations in the city that may have similar goals. Second, the group does not (yet) enjoy the participation of many parents and teachers from across the city in the group's meetings and actions. Both act as constraints on problem-solving, as I explore next.

### *Ability to solve problems*

This is among the most challenging dimensions to assess, for two main reasons: So many factors help determine problem-solving capacity, and there are myriad ways to interpret that capacity where complex issues, shifting roles, dispersed capacity, and ongoing conflict and mistrust are in the picture. The DNIA Education Committee has demonstrated some key abilities more than others. While the group has had no problem attracting committed individuals, it has had more difficulty with translating this commitment to action. There are some key processes the group has utilized effectively to work toward their goals, but their success has been limited to short-lived media attention and empowerment of a small group of people. In addition, the group relies on the vision and labor of that small group of people to do most of the group's work—a sign, it would appear, of not having built a wider capacity in "the community" to contribute to change.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the strengths and weaknesses of the DNIA Education Committee's community capacity, I offer three key recommendations that will enable the group to achieve its goals as well as deepen its engagement in the city and state's process of rebuilding public education. These recommendations will help increase the group's levels of access to resources and ability to solve problems.

- 1) Translate the idea of “world-class, community-centered” education into a workable plan that policymakers and others can *make decisions about* and *compare* to their own plans.

In the planning tradition, it is a well-established idea that the presence of multiple plans can promote deliberation and result in a better overall plan. In particular, the advocacy planning tradition, from which the current community planning movement originated, emphasizes the importance of community groups developing their own plans rather than providing input into an agency-created plan that attempts to represent *the* public interest. Community-generated plans can empower disenfranchised groups to define for themselves what they want their community to look like; they can also build the capacity of communities to meet future needs, which can transform community development on a broader scale.

The DNIA Education Committee’s goal of creating “world-class, community-centered” schools has rallied community members who care about high-quality, locally-driven schools. However, even though many community members connect with this vision, it is in fact a nebulous idea. If the DNIA Education Committee would like to have the values they deem important in the rebuilding process to be incorporated into the formal plan implemented by the state, members need to create their own alternative plan that specifies what a “world class, community-centered” school looks like.

In creating this plan, the DNIA Education Committee should reference Warren’s (2005) typology of school-community collaboration and determine which model, or hybrid of models, would best meet the needs of New Orleans’ communities. In a post-disaster setting, it seems likely that a hybrid between the *service* and *organizing* approaches (e.g. the politicized community school) would best meet the needs of poor communities of color, because a hybrid could combine the comprehensive services required in a post-disaster setting with the need for authentic decision-making by parents in schools, who have been historically marginalized in school governance in New Orleans.

- 2) Build alliances with other organizations and actors in order to leverage vital resources and deepen impact.

Strategic alliances can offer many benefits to a group like the DNIA Education Committee that has clear goals, yet does not have everything it needs to effectively achieve those goals. For example, one of the group’s goals is to develop a model for a community-centered school at John Mac. The group has already begun to reach out to “experts” across the country to learn about promising community school models, but it still lacks the educational and organizational development *expertise* and *information* about what similar groups in and outside the city are doing in order to develop this model on their own. The DNIA Education Committee should consider strategic alliances that enable information sharing (e.g. what approaches are other groups with similar goals taking?) and the exchange of expertise (e.g. you teach me about model parent engagement strategies and I teach you about effective media campaign strategies). These types of alliances require minimal interdependence yet can provide the DNIA Education Committee with the additional resources it needs to deepen its impact at the neighborhood level.

The DNIA Education Committee should probably not seek out alliances that require high levels of interdependence (e.g. fully merging with another group) for reasons that cause many alliances to fail. First, the DNIA Education Committee already meets on a weekly basis and its core members devote hours comparable to a second job to their activities. The group should not engage in a partnership that requires so much coordination that members are bogged down by even more meetings and more complex coordination. Second, New Orleans is a city where reputation goes a long way to determining the success of an organization. With the history of conflict between activist groups in the city and the challenge of finding a partner whose values and working styles match its own, the DNIA Education Committee may be better off remaining an independent entity.

- 3) Build capacity at the base to gain broader and more legitimate representation and promote social learning necessary to create an alternative plan.

So far, the DNIA Education Committee has focused on increasing its ability to influence decision-makers to achieve the outcomes it desires. One tactic members have already defined in order to increase their influence is to reach out to additional school staff and parents of children who are currently in New Orleans public schools. Rightly so, members believe that this would better connect them to the reality of the situation in schools, and provide them with legitimacy in their claims that they speak for a particular population. However, outreach is not sufficient to build an effective constituency for change. The value of building capacity at the base is not just about broader and more legitimate representation. It is also about social learning that the base needs to develop an alternative plan to rebuilding public education. That plan must be feasible while also directly addressing the group's goals.

One way for the DNIA Education Committee to promote social learning is to implement the community education workshops they have been talking about for months, making sure to clearly define goals that can not only bring people together but also enable them to accomplish something together. For example, a fundamental characteristic of community schools is parent engagement. Yet, there are numerous strategies offered by school leaders, researchers, and parents about how to effectively engage parents and for what purposes. One or several of the proposed community education workshops could bring people together to develop parent engagement strategies that are relevant to their community and are possible to implement at their local schools. Another idea is for the DNIA Education Committee to engage in a structured reflective session where members identify what they have learned so far about the impact they have made and how they have personally changed as a result of their work, and then figure out how to apply these lessons to their work in order to deepen their impact.

### **Final thoughts**

The above recommendations are relational in nature and practical in approach. They are intended to support the DNIA Education Committee transition from a group of concerned citizens interested in becoming involved in civic life into a vibrant community with a high degree of capacity to work towards its goal of educational equity across the city. Plans that do

not incorporate the knowledge of ordinary people are doomed to fail. Yet plans do not simply emerge from widespread community concern or even from mobilization. Hopefully, the lessons from this case study have provided sufficient evidence for more inclusive, participatory and also pragmatic planning processes—processes that value equity and authentic decision-making power for ordinary people who are working to build a better educational future in extraordinary times.



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