

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
CHARTER SCHOOL CITY:
A BOOK DISCUSSION WITH DOUGLAS HARRIS

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, September 2, 2020

PARTICIPANTS:

Welcome:

JON VALANT
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies, Center on Education Policy
The Brookings Institution

Book Presentation:

DOUGLAS N. HARRIS
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brown Center on Education Policy
The Brookings Institution

Panelists:

ANDRE M. PERRY, Moderator
Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program
The Brookings Institution

RANDI WEINGARTEN
President
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

ARNE DUNCAN
Former U.S. Secretary of Education (2009-2015)
Managing Partner, Emerson Collective

* * * * *

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. VALANT: (in progress) psychological, social and environmental harm. The aftermath from the storm involved a great deal of effort to rebuild and address many of the problems and inequities that Katrina exposed. One of the most significant and fiercely debated responses to the storm was the effort to reconstruct the public education system in New Orleans, as one in which families would choose from a collection of autonomous charter schools.

Today we'll be talking about those school reforms. We'll begin with a short presentation by Douglas Harris, a Professor of Economics, at Tulane University, and Nonresident Senior Fellow at Brookings. Doug will discuss his new book, "Charter School City: What the End of Traditional Public Schools in New Orleans Means for American Education." After Doug's introduction, we'll hear from our panelists.

Moderating that discussion will be Andre Perry, a fellow at Brookings, and the author of his own recent outstanding book, "Know Your Price: Valuing Black Lives and Property in America's Black Cities." Andre will be joined by Secretary Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education from 2009 to 2015, in the Obama Administration, and now Managing Partner at Emerson Collective and Chicago CRED. And rounding out the remarkable group is Randi Weingarten, the President of the American Federation of Teachers, and former President of the United Federation of Teachers in New York.

We would certainly welcome audience questions for the panelists, and we'll get to some of those toward the end of the hour that we have together. If you'd like to submit questions, please do so via email at events@brookings.edu, or via [twitter@brookingsed](https://twitter.com/brookingsed), or [#charterschoolcity](https://twitter.com/charterschoolcity).

Thank you all. And, with that, I will turn it over to Doug.

MR. HARRIS: Thanks, Jon. So I want to thank Brookings for hosting this event, especially in this time of crisis. You know, we have COVID; we have our long-coming reckoning with racial injustice. Now these are -- they are difficult times.

New Orleans, in particular, is no stranger to crisis. We have a long history ourselves with pandemics, and with racial injustice, and with hurricanes. We had a hurricane circling around us lately.

And, as you said, 15 years ago, last week, we had another one with Hurricane Katrina.

And I think the big question is, how do we respond to these crisis? We can roll up our sleeves and make the best of it, treating these as opportunities to correct old problems and think anew, or we can let the challenge get the best of us, letting fear and distrust wider prior divides. But depending on your perspective on the New Orleans' reforms, you can make either case.

Now one thing not in debate, however, is that the New Orleans' school reforms were unprecedented. The state took over almost all publicly-funded schools and eventually turned management over to non-profit charter management organizations.

These charter schools are subject to strict accountability through performance-based contracts. The new school leaders were given autonomy, especially, over teachers and other personnel. And, in theory, families can now choose the schools their children attend.

So when I say, "the school reform," this is what I mean, this entire set of policy changes. So it was so unprecedented that no city had ever done any one of these things before. And New Orleans, in the wake of the storm, did all of them at once, and we have stayed on that path now for 15 years. So you can see where the main title of the book comes from; New Orleans became Charter School City.

This is a good time to be talking about charter schools because it's been three decades now since the first charter school opened, and today there are more than 7,000 charter schools in the U.S. And we're in the midst of a presidential election in which school choice, including charters and vouchers, are playing a bigger role than, perhaps, ever before.

But whatever you think of them, the New Orleans' reforms are clearly a big deal. The fact that Arne Duncan and Randi Weingarten were gracious enough to join this conversation, and Andre Perry was willing to moderate, tells you what's at stake here.

So I wrote the book with five goals in mind. First, I wanted to just tell the story of the reforms, almost like a good journalist would do. It's really a fascinating story. I interviewed those who put the reforms in place, as well as reform critics, and reported their stories. Interestingly, though, this reform

design was unprecedented, there are actually many parallels between this reform effort and prior ones throughout the nation over the last century.

Second, I wanted to put the story in context, in the context of the city and its rich history, but also within the broader political and ideological battles in which they sit. In particular, I explain how the reforms fit into the age-old debate about markets versus government in schools.

On the one hand, I explain how the nature of schooling is ill-suited toward a free market; on the other hand, governments can also fail and schooling can still benefit from market forces, specifically, from placing power in the hands of families and school leaders. So this leads to one of the main themes of the book that some combination of markets and governments are necessary to create excellent and equitable schooling.

Now, the third goal, I wanted to describe the effects of the reforms on those who matter most, students. Though, when I first came to New Orleans in 2012, I have to say that I was really skeptical of the reforms. In the seven years after Katrina, student test scores and graduation rates had risen very quickly, in fact, almost too quickly.

There were many reasons to be skeptical that these improvements were really caused by the reforms. But I kept an open mind. We could test all of these theories that were being thrown out.

And using a vast trove of data that we collected, I started the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane and created an advisory board, a group that included, both supporters, and opponents of the reforms so that we didn't miss anything, and we produced three dozen studies, more than a dozen of which have been published in peer review journals. I want to thank the whole team who worked on this. I really couldn't have done it without you.

So what did we find after all of these years of analysis? So it actually turned out that the reforms did improve student outcomes. The reforms raised average student test scores in the city from the 22nd percentile nationally to go to 37th percentile, compared with the match comparison group of districts, the high school graduation rate increased 3 to 9 percentage points; college enrollment increased 8 to 15 percentage points; college completion increased 3 to 5 percentage points.

The results improved for all students, black and white, rich and poor; opportunity gaps declined; parent satisfaction improved. We can rule out most of the alternative explanations. So this is the second way in which the reforms were unprecedented.

No one had ever designed a system like this before, and no reform of any kind had ever shown so much success across so many measures, across an entire school district. So it's not likely that we'd see the same effects since we adopted the reforms elsewhere but this is at least a proof of concept.

Fourth, I wanted to explain why student outcomes increased the way they were. This is, in some sense, the most important question. You know, this was a whole package of reforms, so what part of it actually mattered the most.

School funding is one factor that comes up a lot, and money certainly does matter in schools; and New Orleans increased spending by about 13 percent after the reforms were put in place, compared to the other similar districts. But this is probably still not the main explanation for improvement. The district was already around the state average on funding before Katrina, but it was far below the state average on its effectiveness.

So, in other words, the district was pretty dysfunctional, and so just putting more money into the old system probably wouldn't have helped. You needed to have some kind of reform as well.

Competition between schools, school autonomy, they also probably played some role. But there is one thing that really stands out here and that's accountability. So, in Louisiana the main oversight body or authorizer of charter schools was the State Recovery School District.

The state wrote contracts with charter schools requiring them to produce high test schools and raise high school graduation rates, and the state was strict about this. There were about 80 schools in New Orleans at any given time in the publicly-funded category, and the state opened and then took over more than 40 of them since the reform started.

So, not surprisingly, if you take over schools based on one measure and you replace them with schools that are better on that measure then that average is going to go up. That part is not a mystery but it's an important point.

Remember that the reforms were thought of as a market-based reform. But this role for accountability suggests the government was still maintaining a quite large role, just a different one from what traditional districts would have.

The fifth and final goal for the book was to talk about the problems with the reforms. So I talked about the measurable effects of the reforms, but there were some effects that were harder to measure. In the book, I talk about possible negative effects on neighborhoods.

I talk about how, in a city where the arts are part of the fabric and culture, how the arts received little attention in schools after the reforms and they were mostly seen as a tool for raising test scores.

Also, I talk about this broader focus and how it neglects an unjust process of reform. I think the process matters as much as the results because the process affects what decisions get made; so if you make bad decisions, you can get some bad results.

Again, I can assure you that if the community had been deciding which schools would open after the reforms, the arts would not have been an afterthought the way they turned out to be. The process also matters because engaging people in decisions creates buy-in; instead, the process in New Orleans was top-down.

This is important because another issue that is getting well-deserved attention right now, and that's racism. I mentioned how important the authorization process was. Well, here is what one black educator said, someone who had applied for a charter school, and this is his description of the experience.

He said, "We really tried, but it became clear that they didn't want us. We represented a failed black voter bureaucracy. Controlling and operating schools wasn't for us, it was for them," meaning for whites -- and this wasn't true just for the authorization process, all the key leaders who put their reforms in place were white.

Even though the vast majority of students in the publicly-funded schools in the city and the majority of the voters in New Orleans are black, most the city's elected representatives voted against

the changes in state laws necessary to put the reforms in place.

So, probably as a result, the polling data from parents and voters as well, showing improvement on average still yield the racial divide. So with these reforms the city's leaders made the best of it in some ways, but the situation also got the best of them.

All right. So what does this all mean? I think we can just touch the surface of the book and the story in the time we have here. But I hope that some of this has surprised or intrigued you, as much as I was when I was actually writing the book. But I just want to finish by reading the last two paragraphs of the book, which I think pulled together some of these threads:

"My main goal here is meant to describe what happened in New Orleans and why, as accurately and completely as possible. It's a story worth telling, especially if doing so helps to move school reform forward in some small way, by kindling ambition in our educational goals, creativity in our thinking and the realism that comes from hard evidence.

It is useful to see something that is both new and measurably successful that forces us to question things we have long taken for granted. Before Katrina, New Orleans may have been the last place on earth to expect anything innovative. Some would say the same right now about the country as a whole. Scholars, experts, and advocates have fretted about how tepidly we pursue even the most modest of educational goals.

My hope is that other cities and states will build on the New Orleans' experience with the desire to copy, not its design and prospects, but its ambition and inventiveness. No system will ever be enough and each system is what people make of it, but decisions we make are not to be taken lightly given that the character of our schools in subtle, yet powerful ways, change the character of the children they serve."

MR. VALANT: All right. Well, let's have a broader discussion here. Andre Perry is going to join us here and lead the conversation.

MODERATOR: Well, thanks for that wonderful introduction, Doug. As many people know, I was an educational leader in New Orleans, lived there for 14 years. It's a city that means a lot to

me, and it means a lot to me that I was included in this presentation. So, thank you.

You know, I remember meeting Arne and Randi in the context of New Orleans' ed reform, so I think this is, in many ways, a reunion for us. And it's an important one given that it's been 15 years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall in this city.

And I want to jump right into this. But for those who want to ask questions, you can send those questions to events@brookings.edu, or you utilize Twitter by utilizing the #charterschoolcity -- again, the #charterschool city, and you can email your questions at events@brookings.edu.

Randi Weingarten may have to leave approximately 10 minutes prior to the closing of this event. So I just want to give you an update.

But I want to pick up where you left off, Doug, on this issue of structural racism. As you know, and many know, that in New Orleans, black residents were forced out of the schools. Police, literally, shot innocent people on bridges and in other areas. There was a lot of practices and policies that preceded school reform that really were revealed by Hurricane Katrina.

So I just want to ask you, first, Doug, how do you account for structural racism in your analyses because so many people start with sort of a before Katrina and after Katrina sort of analysis, but they ignore the decades' long of policy violence level against black people and black schools?

MR. HARRIS: Yeah. No question that that history mattered a lot here. You know, it mattered because of the inequality in income and wealth that it created, which itself then influenced access to resources, access to schools, quality schools, before the reforms were put in place.

It matters because of the history of black people in the city because they had been disenfranchised and not being part of -- you know, of conversations, including about the rebuilding of the city.

You know, a lot of those decisions were made from the outside, and I think one of the key themes of the book is that it was kind of an outside-in and top-down approach that -- you know, some I think, you know, started public conversations, and there were a lot of public events and meetings held.

But when you think about what the big decisions were that were made, they were mostly

being made from people outside the city -- and not just outside the city because of the storm, but outside because -- you know, the state government, and federal government, and foundations, and so on, that were really pushing things.

So I think that certainly had an influence over the fact that a system like this could be put in place the way it would and that, you know, their unfortunate history of foisting reforms and changes on people rather than engaging them in the process.

MODERATOR: I'm going to turn this over to Randi now, this question. About 7500 employees were fired in the aftermath of the storm; more than 4,000 were teachers. Unions have been portrayed as both antagonists against change and as victims in the New Orleans story.

What role do you see unions playing in the Choice movements moving forward? And what have you learned about organizing from the New Orleans example?

MS. WEINGARTEN: So, first off, I'm glad to be part of this. And that's a big question, Andrea. Let me see if I can attack three or four pieces of it. And, again, my apologies for being in a car, but we are -- today was the day where we are demanding safe schools all throughout the country, and so I was in Philadelphia. But safety being safety, instead of taking trains back, we are taking cars back and forth these days.

So, you know, I would actually just pause for a second on what you just said about who got fired and why. And, at the end of the day, the fact that basically the middle -- the black middle class in New Orleans got fired and there was, except for our union, there was no one within the hierarchy, which was basically white, trying to figure out how to keep the black middle class in New Orleans, is a travesty and a stain that still goes on to this day.

The issue about whether or not what you just said, what the baseline was, there had been such fights and inequity up until, or pre-Katrina, so it is a pretty unfair baseline to use public schools, free Katrina versus market-driven charter schools, post-Katrina, where there was actually no fulsome public system versus the charter system. And I think that Doug, actually, (inaudible) structural issues in the book, and I really appreciated that.

Going forward, what teachers ultimately want, and what parents ultimately want is real choice, but they want a level playing field. And if you actually give them a level playing field where you give them real funded schools, and you actually say that this is what you could have in a neighborhood public school, overwhelmingly, parents and educators will choose the kind of neighborhood public schools because they are foundational, more foundational to communities than not.

The issue that we have is that we have actually always been in favor of lots of public school choice. But the kind of politics of all of this have put people into different camps in a way that if you actually engage in any way in the other camp you get vilified. I'll give you an example:

Just this last month, the Charter School Association asked me to speak at the National Charter School Association, you know, because in the middle of COVID, there are so many issues that are joint and we actually represented 250 teachers and 250 charter schools.

And, you know, teachers in many, many more charter schools would like to have had representation. And Jeannie Allen, and her ilk, made such a big fuss that after I got invited, I got disinvited.

So the issue really is: How do you actually have, and believe in -- and I think that, knowing full well, that still, to this date, so many of the charters -- I think half of the charters in New Orleans are still getting D's and F's.

How do you figure out a way that we make sure that every single child gets the school that he or she thrives in, a school that parents want to send their kids to, that educators want to work at, that is well-funded, and that is actually dealing with excellence and equity?

If we could actually compete on those terms, public schools would do extraordinarily well through the United States and we would not have this innate argument about whether public schooling. We saw this in McDowell County, West Virginia, where, frankly, the top-down reformers had failed and we were asked to come in and try to help.

We said we wouldn't take over the school system, but we would try to put the best practices in that we know. And this is the eighth worst county in America. And if I stood up those reforms

over eight years, and what we had accomplished, you'd see something that actually looked a lot better than New Orleans and other places.

It was we increased -- we increased the graduation rates by about 20 percent, or 20 points, from 70's to the 90's; we doubled the number of kids going to college; we turned around achievement in some of the poorest elementary schools.

But the real issue becomes: How do we have these kind of best practices of meeting children where they are, giving them the kind of engagement, relationship-building, that we're trying to do right now, even in a pandemic, actually make the issues about powerful instruction instead of testing, the be all or the end all, and actually dealing with the issues of the whole child.

And if we could actually do that and not have this terrible fight about whether public schools, or whether charters, but we could actually fully fund public schools, we would -- that's the kind of Choice system that I think would really work, but we can't make it a zero sum system. And that's what we have been trying to focus on and fight for -- how we have well-funded schools.

MODERATOR: And I'm going to actually turn this over to Arne because on many of the things that Randi talked about, some of the basic goals, I think you were trying to achieve in many of your reform strategies, in particular, race to the top, there were a lot of things in that bundle of -- in federal initiatives to reform school districts across the country.

Just give me your initial reaction. How do you think reforms at the national level played out in New Orleans? And looking back, what reforms would you advance if you were Secretary of Education again?

MR. DUNCAN: A good friend of mine said to always state your condition. So I do want to say, I have not been spending a lot of time on these issues these days.

I'm really focused on the pandemic, really focused on trying to keep kids and teachers safe these days, trying to fight for our democracy, working to reduce gun violence here in Chicago, which is the hardest and, frankly, the most dangerous I have ever done. So, I am not spending a lot of time with the nuances of education policies. I've got bigger, and bigger fish to fry these days, quite frankly.

But I think at the end of the day, you know, what do we want for every child? We want them to have access to great teachers; we want them to have access to high standards; we want to have honest assessments of where they are, and where they're not; you know, we put a huge emphasis on early childhood education. That's not the point of this conversation today. There will have to be a building block around upon which all of this rests.

It's interesting. I'm doing a weekly call since March, around food insecurity and how to keep -- while schools are closed, how do we keep feeding kids, and would suggest unbelievable creativity, and thoughtfulness, and compassion, and from school districts and non-profits across the country feeding kids.

So, you know, but one of the goals everywhere, or anywhere for kids, whether it's 10 years ago, or 15 years ago, or now, is access to great teachers, is access to high quality instruction. I would add technology to that mix now, more than every before in this virtual world.

That was not something we were focused on there, and want kids to have the chance to not just graduate and go to college, but I want to -- you know, just maybe complicate the narrative a little bit. I think you could make a pretty compelling argument, there was systemic racism in New Orleans, you know, historically, as it was everywhere in the country.

I would make an argument, there was systemic racism in the New Orleans public school system, pre-Katrina. And as the book lays out, there was systemic racism in how things were set up after, and we have to in education be willing to take on these kinds of tough truths. And as we try and challenge the country, we have to look internally and look in the mirror.

I mean, there is two quick anecdotes. It's from hard lessons I learned when I led Chicago public schools. We had a real school-to-prison pipeline, and we challenged that and were able to reduce, you know, the number of young people being arrested in our schools, but that for me was a form of systemic racism, but we know who was getting arrested was young kids of color.

We doubled -- as you saw in New Orleans -- we were able to double in four years the number of kids taking and passing the AP classes -- well, that we're very, very proud of that.

I always said the truth is our children weren't twice as smart four years later than they were four years prior, they simply were denied those kinds of opportunities to take high-level classes, and we know who is denied those opportunities is kids of color.

So we just had, you know, the intercession of class, and race is also very, very important. So it was a complicated narrative. And just to try and talk about it openly, and honestly, and to look in the mirror and be self-reflective of where we were, and where we are, and where we're trying to go. But I think that the goals for me, whether it's 10 years ago, or 15 years, or today, those goals remain absolutely the same.

MODERATOR: Can I just follow up quickly because one of the things I say all of the time, kids don't live in schools, they live in communities. It sounds like your suggestion that reform needs to take on more community development than some of the sort of technical aspects around curriculum, instruction, governance.

Is that true? And, if so, what's the future of reform moving forward? Should it be more around community development?

MR. DUNCAN: Well, I'll just say, again, what I've seen all of my life, when I grew and my mother (inaudible) was -- you can call her with a phone call, whatever, first, you have to meet kids physical, and social, and emotional needs.

So that's why I have spent so much time within the past six months on the feeding part of this because, my mother, she always said if the kids are -- if kids' stomachs are growling they can't learn, and so we have to keep kids fed.

We have to make sure they're not being bullied; we have to make sure they're free of fear. We have kids that live with an amazing amount of trauma today. And that's probably the biggest thing I'm working on today is trying to help young men work through a lifetime of trauma.

And now we have, you know, millions of kids around the country who are experiencing new trauma, where families were living, you know, sort of okay, paycheck-to-paycheck-to-paycheck. Those paychecks disappear and now their whole world has been upended. And so, those are the things

that we have to do.

I'm also going to always be uncompromised in saying we need to have the highest of academic standards. I want kids taking AP Algebra and Biology, and Physics. I want those high school graduation rates going up. Because if they're not, we're condemning kids to poverty and social failure.

I want more kids going on to, you know, a four-year university, two-year community college, whatever it might be. So we have just been looking at all of those things, and for me it's obvious that there is no conflict in any of that. I'm as passionate about feeding kids than I am about taking AP Physics.

I'm as passionate about telehealth right now, as I am about, you know, college completion rates. These things aren't in competition and one without the other. Again, for me the foundation to all of this is physical, and social, and emotional health. That's never change but upon -- if you have that strong foundation it was absolutely challenged to see that the higher academic was -- better academics results for kids that we're seeing, whether it's in New Orleans, or McDowell County, or wherever it might be. We just need more -- we have to give kids a chance to be successful.

And the last thing I will quickly say, and you guys know this, that when I was in high school, I had friends that dropped out of high school and it wasn't great, but it truly wasn't the end of the world. And they could go work here in Chicago, in the stockyards and steel mills and earn a pretty good living and buy a house and support a family.

We know that those jobs are gone, they are never coming back. And absent a high school diploma today, and absent some form of learning beyond high school, we don't give our kids a chance to compete in this very, very, very tough economy.

So this for me is not just about education. It's really about giving young people a chance to enter the middle class, to break cycles of poverty, provide for their family, and to have the kind of life that, you know, all of us in the Zoom parlor are privileged enough to have.

MODERATOR: And I want to --

MS. WEINGARTEN: Can I just jump in there, Andre?

MODERATOR: Go ahead.

MS. WEINGARTEN: Because I think what Arne just said is probably the most important thing we can do going forward. The problem with the reform debate over the course of the last, I would say, let's say, 20 years, is the same as what's now going on in terms of reopening schools; that top-down nationally there was a lot of mishandling.

And so, what's happening is, bottom-up, people are trying to figure this out. I was on one of Arne's phone calls, in terms of food insecurity, about what everybody is trying to do to figure this out -- about, you know, having to figure out how to actually meet the needs of kids who don't have digital equipment.

And so, ultimately, we need to actually nest this conversation about schooling in the conversation about equity, and about housing, and transportation, and food insecurity, and wellness. And that is why I think you have seen a shift in terms of the school communities focusing on children's well-being and schooling as center of community and community schools as really, really important.

Because we can't -- we will not be able to advance learning and achievement by ourselves. It's not about the model of charter versus public; it is about what are we going to do about equity and excellence focusing on well-being first?

MODERATOR: Now, Doug, I want you to follow up on that because you essentially say in your book that, on balance, this has been a successful reform but it had significant tradeoffs.

And from a research perspective, if you emphasize test score growth, do you overshadow these community issues? And, if so, how do you elevate these essential issues around housing, transportation, all of those things, when we develop reforms moving forward?

MR. HARRIS: That's a great question. I mean I think -- and, you know, think about Arne's case when, you know, Arne was superintendent in Chicago, he was the superintendent of essentially all of the schools in Chicago, and probably more easily coordinated with other organizations.

And in a decentralized system, where you don't really have anybody quite in charge, the district, the local district now is the authorizer of alternative schools, but can't really negotiate on behalf of

those schools because they're really -- the schools are just operating under contract.0

So, with that said, I will say that if you talk to them individual, the way you talk to the charter leaders in the reform community, you know, they talk about these issues all of the time, you know, the fact that no matter what they do in schooling, no matter what they do with test scores, and so on, the labor market is dismal for -- you know, especially, young black people in the city.

There was another study done I think some years ago, about social mobility in New Orleans. New Orleans has one of the lowest social mobility rates; that the probability of getting out of poverty, if you've been raised in New Orleans in poverty, is one of the lowest in the county.

So it just reflects that we don't have a lot of opportunity. You know, Arne talking about having good jobs, and I know he's doing a lot on crime and trying to reduce gang violence. You know, all of that's still very real here and so -- and you said yourself how students don't live in their schools, they live in their community.

So I think people recognize that that's a problem the reform group recognizes and I think they try to do things. I think that's more of an open question how well they're able to coordinate across all of these separate pieces in this new kind of school system to do that.

MODERATOR: Yeah, and so I want to just dig a little deeper in this. As Randi noted, the firing of the teachers created a huge wound that has -- really has not healed since. Can you explain the economics behind teachers, the importance of teachers in a community, not just the educational sort of benefits of teaching?

MR. HARRIS: Well, teaching is one of the largest professions, especially in a big city where there are not a lot of private sector opportunities, teaching in public schools is one of the best paths to middle class.

And so, at one point, I did a calculation. At what percentage, when they fired all of the teachers in the city, at what percentage of the black middle class? I don't remember the number, but it was a really large number.

MODERATOR: Like four percent, like --

MR. HARRIS: Huh?

MODERATOR: Wasn't it four percent, or something?

MR. HARRIS: I think it was actually even higher than that. You know, so with just in firing the teachers, you were getting rid of a large percentage of the black middle class; and, yes, you hired new teachers to replace the. But, again, there are teachers who are coming in from the outside.

And, you know, not so much with a history in New Orleans, and many of them don't stay very long. We have a very high turnover rate, as well, because teachers tend to stay and go where they grew up, or near where they went to college.

And so, it's sort of a -- the system is sort of designed to have higher turnover in a way, and so you don't end up fixing the problem necessarily even in the long-run because the teachers being brought in aren't staying and recreating that long-term middle class.

MODERATOR: Now, I'm going to -- I want this to go to Arne and Randi -- and this is around parents. The Choice advocates will say, you know, it's criminal to not allow my child to have an additional option that traditional neighborhood schools don't provide.

What do you say to those parents who feel that they don't have options and they want government to create them?

And I'll start with you. I'll go to you, Arne, and then Randi.

MR. DUNCAN: You know, I'll again just make all of this stuff very personal life. My first job was running a "I Have a Dream" program with a group of 6th graders, and our goal, my sister and I, was to work with them for six years through, you know, 6th grade through 12th grade. I was the guy that was known as driving the white van around and picking kids up after school and bringing them in.

The neighborhood where we worked was a very poor neighborhood on the southside of Chicago. And after our kids' 7th grade year, the Chicago public schools actually closed that school that we had adopted the entire 6th grade class because performance was so poor.

And that was a very, very hard time. And we were going down to the Board of Education protesting that closing. And we didn't -- you know, the school closed and we had to scramble to move

kids between the 7th and 8th grade year, which is not a natural transition point. And that was a really, really hard thing to do.

What we found through that experience though was actually fascinating; that we were able, basically, across the board, we placed kids primarily in public schools. We placed a couple in Catholic schools, whatever it may be, but we were able to find really good fits for our kids, for their education.

Very importantly, where my sister and I disagreed, and what parents thought, we always followed the parents' wisdom. And, not surprisingly, they always had the right choice for what their best education was for their kids.

We had a set of twins, and, you know, figuring out every child learns differently. So I do think it's important that we have, you know, really good options for kids. I think the most important thing we can do is have a great neighborhood public school for every child in the country.

That, ultimately, is the goal for me. Whether it's a, you know, traditional, or magnet, or IB, or charter, it doesn't -- and name doesn't feel -- you know, I'm pretty agnostic on the name, I just want a great school. I just want schools for kids to graduate, and kids have a chance to go college, and for me it's all about quality.

The fascinating thing for me is that none of our parents we work with, not a single one, had college experience. Many had graduated from high school. So while you might say they weren't -- you know, had all of the advantages educationally, they were unbelievably in tune of what their own kids needed.

They had a Ph.D. in knowing what their child's strengths and weaknesses were, and what the best fit for them were -- was, and we'd try, two, or three, or four different options. They, every single time, 100 percent of the time, picked the right school for their kid.

And I think that's just so important that every parent wants the best for their child, whatever their education, their own personal level of education experience might be. And I think really trusting parents, listening to them, knowing how much they care. You know, it's their most precious thing

in the world is their child. Really trusting them and listening to them, I think is just so critically important.

MODERATOR: Randi, parents, what do you say to a parent that say they want government to increase the amount of options for them?

MS. WEINGARTEN: I think that parents have a right to want to have lots of different choices. The issue, in terms of public versus private choices are the issue about discrimination and fairness and what should be -- you know, what should be held accountable when you have public money.

But what I hear parents say a lot is that they don't want their -- and I hear teachers say this, obviously, also -- they don't want their thumb on the scale, meaning that you take money away from a public school, you don't actually create the equity there; you don't create the AP courses that Arne was talking about before because of austerity, austerity, austerity; and then because of private fundraising, or all sorts of other tax breaks, or things like that, you can actually stand up a really beautiful charter school.

That's not playing -- that's not a level playing field. We need to actually make sure that public schools have the resources that they need so that a parent has the right and has the choice to send her or his kids, or children, to a neighborhood public school.

So we need to fix not close neighborhood public schools; we need to stand them up in a way that they can be real choices and meet the needs of parents. And I suspect that if we did that that you'd -- and not have this kind of debate that we have going on right now.

When I went to school in the dinosaur age, we had lots, and lots of Catholic schools. And there was never this level of vitriol between choices. Parents made whatever choices they made and that was -- you know, and publics and Catholics, frankly, you know, 20, 30 years ago, worked side-by-side and did things together.

But the vitriol, the saying that the market -- that this attempt to prove that the market and privatization is better than the public square, I think is part of what is wrong with the so-called -- with this movement towards choice.

Choice started as a way of opting white kids out of public schools. And, ultimately, choice should be what parents need for their children. But they need to make -- we need to make sure

that public schools can be a viable option for parents.

MODERATOR: And I want to take this, really, just a little bit to what's going on in the presidential races. President Trump has stated on multiple occasions that he is supportive of Choice.

And I'll throw this at you, Arne: What's the difference between a Trump-level of choice -- and let's, for the sake of argument, let's remove vouchers from that equation, let's remove it. How does your vision of choice differ from a Trump?

MR. DUNCAN: Well, I don't think he has a vision of choice. I think he's a con man and kids are pawns in his political game. So, I mean, I'm happy to answer that question but it's -- you know, it's not night and day.

So we're facing a pandemic. He doesn't care how many kids die; he doesn't care how many teachers die; he doesn't care how many parents die. There is no body count high enough for him to actually listen to science and listen to facts; and the fact that our kids, and our teachers, and our parents are dealing with what we're dealing with now; the fact there are communities across the country have lost so many people due to COVID.

I have lost two friends. I have another friend who has had a couple of fingers amputated. He's got all kinds of neurological challenge; this is a wicked, wicked disease. If, again, if you throw choice out the window, if the current president cared about humanity, if he cared about kids, if he cared about education, he would have invested a couple of hundred billion dollars months ago to help our schools have a chance to be safe so that we could physically reopen, as we all want to do.

If he actually cared about kids and education, he wouldn't have lied and said it was a hoax to not follow science. And so, you know, and there is no -- there is just no intellectual honesty there, whatsoever. You know, kids are literally just pawns in his political game, and for me it's just the saddest, you know, scariest thing that I have ever seen in my life. This is absolutely stunning to me.

MODERATOR: Randi --

MR. DUNCAN: it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter how many people die that it just -- it doesn't matter. It truly doesn't matter.

MODERATOR: Randi, can you answer this question?

MS. WEINGARTEN: What the president does is the president is a con man. We know him well from New York. And so, they have a good -- the have a good word. Everybody loves choice. Look, we want choices in our federal election. But what they really mean by the word is destabilizing.

All Betsy DeVos has tried to do is defund and destabilize public schools. To take Arne's point, they're trying to take a billion dollars from the CARE money that was supposed to go to low income students and take it to private schools in "the name of Choice," when private schools all throughout the country got PPP, which public schools did not get.

So it's just basically a hoax and a fraud, as opposed to actually leveling the playing field, trying to make sure that we could actually, safely reopen schools, get the food -- get the funding for food, instead of it being expiring at the end of September; get the funding for digital equipment, instead of having 20 or 30 percent of kids right now not having access to digital equipment; and getting -- and not having this really stupid, false, agonizing debt over whether remote is okay if we can't make things safe in a place like Florida.

So it's really just a destabilizing of public schools so that the only alternative in his view is private, and it's just a fraud.

MODERATOR: Doug? Did you want to respond to that, Doug?

MR. HARRIS: I just wanted to ask a quick follow-up, if you don't mind, to Randi because I know she may have to jump off.

You know, eventually, we'll be past COVID, and we'll be -- we'll have a new president and will be able to think a little bit --

MS. WEINGARTEN: One hopes. (Laughter)

MR. HARRIS: Yes. So, is there a version of charter schooling, or of this kind of a reform that you would support, and what would that look like? What specific changes would you like to see that are, in some ways, in the same direction but --

MS. WEINGARTEN: Look, Doug, we have actually done a whole bunch of work on this,

in terms of our union has always been open to charter schools. I still serve on the Board of one of the highest performing public charter schools in the Bronx that has routinely had 100 percent graduation rates of our children. We represent teachers in 250 charter schools.

The real issue becomes, we have to make sure that public schools have the funding that they need. And we have to make sure that everyone is on a level playing field and that there is not this gerry rigging -- gerry rigging that we see in some charter school laws that enable charter schools to be able to manipulate the data, to expel kids, to do these kinds of things, and then say, "See, we're doing so much better than public schools."

But I do think that there is a place for publicly-accountable charter schools in the school systems of the future. I think that there is really a focus -- we have to focus on well-being of children, on how we engage powerful instruction, how we create real communities so that we're meeting the needs of communities -- particularly, our kids -- and how we train teachers to be able to basically be, you know, the -- you know, mom, dad, grandma, coach, and all of the things that we expect teachers to do, both culturally and academically.

So I think there is a role. But what I keep saying, over and over again, is this notion that the market is better than the public, is just wrong. And that was the underlying notion that happened in this top-down model in New Orleans, which had to start by expunging and eliminating all public schools, including people who have spent their life, a disproportionately black and brown teaching force, that have spent their life becoming teachers and had stood up the middle class in New Orleans.

MODERATOR: And, Doug, I want to stay on this topic of students, particularly, students with special needs. One of the early failures, market failures, if you will, was that many -- oh, and Randi is going to have to depart.

MS. WEINGARTEN: Sorry.

MODERATOR: That's okay. Thank you.

MS. WEINGARTEN: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you for participating.

MS. WEINGARTEN: I just want to say, thank you, to Arne for all of the work that he's doing right now, in terms of food insecurities. It's really a blessing. So, thank you, Arne, for doing all of that work.

MODERATOR: Very good. Now, Doug, special needs students, many fell through the crack, many were not being served, particularly, early on. How did the charter community respond? And is that -- has that response proven to be effective?

MR. HARRIS: Well, I give a few different responses. I think one is, if we look at the test scores -- and I know that this is not the only thing we should be looking at -- that it does look like special education students also improved academically on average.

It doesn't seem, however, just there are enough stories out there where clearly there was discrimination against them in a lot of schools, at least in their early years. I think that's less true now in that the system -- there has been more conversation, you know, first, at the state RSD, and then now at the local district, about having more oversight over that, and making sure that there are better options.

It's tough though in a decentralized system, I'll say, for a couple of reasons. You know, one is that, you know, these schools tend to specialize. Again, the logic of the system is this school is going to be different from that school. They're going to have their own little niche and do things differently, and those often don't entail special education as sort of the focal point.

So then nobody, in particular -- in a traditional public school, all of the schools are responsible for providing special education services. And that's pretty spread out except for the most extreme disabilities.

But in a system like this, there isn't necessarily anybody in charge, so the district has tried to create some of those resources and for the most extreme cases. But I still think they're struggling a bit with the less severely disabled students who end up in different schools.

And part of it is that a lot of the teachers aren't certified in special education. And, you know, this is one thing that's pretty clear in the research about special education is having a certified special education teacher is actually really important. And it's hard to get certified special education

teachers in New Orleans, especially ones who will stay long and kind of gather the experience they need to be effective that way.

MODERATOR: I want to turn to Arne here, to an issue that was near and dear to his heart, at least in terms of policy and practice. This is around the issue of discipline, and discipline practices.

In a Choice model -- or, no, in the New Orleans example, what have we learned about school discipline and what to do, what not to do. And what's the role that schools play in reducing violence, in general, across communities?

MR. DUNCAN: So I don't know. You have to ask Doug the specifics of what New Orleans did, in terms of discipline. I don't know the answer to that. Just very quickly, big picture, it's -- you know, you go to D.C., you think you know some things and you find out quickly how much you don't know.

One of the things we did with the civil rights data collection process was gather a whole bunch of information on the country, and coming out of that to discover that the school-to-prison pipeline doesn't start in middle school, it doesn't start in elementary school, it starts in pre-K; that around the country, we were suspending and expelling 3- and 4-year-olds; and, yes, of course, primarily students of color. That was the biggest cut punch ever.

I had no clue, no clue. And I just can't, for the life of me, imagine what a 3- or 4-year-old would have to do to suspend him or expel them. Yes, they have challenges; yes, they're dealing with trauma; yes, they're dealing with issues.

To answer your question directly, Andre, the role of schools are to not deal with the symptoms of the pain and the trauma, and the anger; the goal is to try and get to the underlying causes. And so, that's social workers, counselors, teachers talking to kids and figuring out what's going on.

Let me be clear, there is nothing more important than having a safe environment. I'm never going to compromise that in school. If a child brings a knife or a gun, obviously, that's not something we can allow. But we have to deal with why kids are struggling. And I can't tell you how many

anecdotes I have had of kids who are presenting as very angry, and very upset.

When you find out what's happening, and you find out that mom got beaten last night at home, or that an older brother got shot; and then you have a conversation, and you start to deal with what's really going on.

The role of schools is to help kids understand that trauma, heal from that trauma, not to put them on the streets, and to do whatever they can to help them be successful as they grow up through those tough times and do well academically.

MODERATOR: Doug, we only have a few minutes here. I want Doug to leave us with sort of a reflective question around the book and the writing.

If you had to write the book over, what story would you include that you did not include, or what issue would you tackle that you did not? And, in addition, what are you most proud of for your book?

MR. HARRIS: Well, I think I'll answer the last part first. I think the thing I like most about the book is its comprehensiveness, and I think -- hopefully, I didn't go overboard.

I think for folks that read it and you'll see it's covering a lot of different topics, and a lot of different angles, a lot of different perspectives, and trying to talk about both, the good and the bad. It ends up you getting -- it gets a little complicated at times.

But I think school reform is complicated. And I think so part of what I was doing was trying to send that message and explain that reality that there is not a simple pass, or anybody that thinks that there is, you know, a magic bullet, there is a single theme, if we just did that, then schools would be a lot better.

I think the book, as well as many other books, dispel that. You know, and similarly with the market versus government, like, just getting the government out of schools is not going to solve the problem and just -- or vice-versa.

In terms of things I would have done differently, I think there are things that we're still trying to do that we haven't been able to do yet, things we're trying to understand, like, the

school-to-prison lifeline and we're still working on that, but I wish I had better answers on that.

Some of the discussion of the arts that I just sort of barely was able to squeeze into the book, we're just getting some of those results in. So I think because we were focused on the data that we had, that was meant to be an evidence-based book, in an evidence-based enterprise, we could only work with the measures that were available.

And so, you know, we tried to squeeze in other things by -- with interviews, and so on, but it was harder for us to do. And, you know, in some ways, I think there could have been more of that, more ways of getting at some of those hard to measure things that we're still trying to do, but have been slower to do.

MODERATOR: Well, thank you all. I want to send a shout out to Jon Valant, Brookings Fellow, who opened up; Secretary Duncan for joining us; Randi Weingarten for joining us; and, of course, Doug Harris.

Go get "Charter School City," wherever fine books are sold. And you can always get my book, "Know Your Price, Valuing Black Lives and Property in Americas Black Cites."

But, on behalf of the entire Brookings Institution, I want to thank you for joining us, and please continue on in the conversation on Twitter with the #charterschoolcity.

All right. Thank you.

MR. HARRIS: Thanks, Andre, and Arne, and Randi.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190