New Orleans established the nation’s first all-charter school district, but is it working? One COE faculty member investigates

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans when it barreled through the city in 2005, damaging whole neighborhoods and displacing hundreds of thousands of residents. But it was the city’s efforts to rebuild the neighborhoods and school systems that truly caught New Orleans native Kristen Buras’s attention.

“Knowing the history of New Orleans and seeing what transpired in the days after Katrina really made me think that we need to be watching very closely who will step into this vacuum,” said Buras, an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies. “What is going to happen to people who have been displaced? Who’s going to step into this vacuum and start making decisions about public schools and neighborhoods?”

In a new book entitled, “Charter schools, race, and urban space: Where the market meets grassroots resistance,” Buras outlines how local, state and federal policymakers worked to create the nation’s first all-charter school system in New Orleans immediately following Hurricane Katrina – a system that’s been plagued by disproportionate funding and gross racial inequities in schools in different neighborhoods, inconsistent and selective application processes across schools, and the replacement of local, veteran teachers with those recruited by nonprofit organizations, among other issues.

One of the problems that stands out most to Buras is that local residents haven’t had the opportunity to share their opinions on and be a part of the rebuilding process – a main impetus for writing the book.

“There are very few longstanding grassroots groups in the city of New Orleans who have been consulted about what they want in the schools or what they think is important,” she said. “Shouldn’t the members of a community be the first people to have a voice in the rebuilding of their schools and their neighborhoods? There were concerns that this wasn’t happening and I felt it was important that those voices be heard.”

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Buras also references reports from national organizations touting what they call the “New Orleans model” of charter schools and suggesting its replication in cities across the country, despite the fact that the vast majority of the city’s charter schools have been rated D or F by the state of Louisiana and still continue to operate.

Buras hopes readers see the problems that can arise when trying to effect change without making community members’ voices part of the conversation.

“I’ve tried to illuminate in the book that there are community voices saying, ‘This is not good for our kids, this is not what we want and this is something that’s contested,’” she said. “The final lesson here is that any school reform that purports to help a community but simultaneously ignores the voices of that community cannot be a democratic reform. Any reform that’s truly democratic requires the input of the people who are directly affected – the students, teachers, educational activists and all the families who make up a community. They should be at the forefront of the discussion around how to better urban schools.”

Dunn: Supporting international teachers is key to success

On her first day teaching in DeKalb County, Alyssa Hadley Dunn met a teacher who had been recruited from India to teach in the United States.

Dunn, who had just completed her master’s thesis on international teachers, befriended her colleague and learned firsthand the difficulties such teachers face when they make the decision to teach abroad.

“International teachers are often recruited by for-profit agencies to work in U.S. urban schools and they are presumed to be able to do that and to be what the agencies call ‘global ambassadors’ without any preparation or support to understand urban contexts,” said Dunn, an assistant professor in the Department of Middle and Secondary Education. “I became very interested in looking at international teachers, preparation, pedagogy and support, as well as the policy contexts in which that recruitment unfolded.”

This became the inspiration for her book, “Teachers Without Borders? The Hidden Consequences of International Teachers,” which, in addition to describing the international context of globalization and neoliberal policies that make recruitment possible, highlights four Indian teachers’ experiences teaching in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States.

Dunn observed these teachers in their classrooms and interviewed principals, school district administrators, recruitment agency employees and union representatives to get a better picture of how and why international teachers are recruited to work in the U.S., and how educators can address the challenges these teachers encounter – from limited professional support and cultural preparation to a fear of deportation and lack of sufficient pay and benefits.
First, Dunn suggests individual schools and districts committed to providing pre-departure and in-country orientation and support should be in charge of their own teacher recruiting, rather than working with for-profit agencies to do so. This may ensure that teachers are better supported before, during and after their time in the U.S.

She also believes colleges of education could be instrumental in developing professional development opportunities for both teachers and administrators in schools that want international educators on their faculty.

“Because international teachers are primarily recruited to teach in urban areas, it would help to establish partnerships with universities and colleges of education to support the teachers and give them the in-service education they need, as well as provide that support for their principals, who need some knowledge of intercultural communication,” she said.

The year: 1865. The Civil War had come to a close, laws banning literacy were abolished and the newly-freed slaves could legally be educated.

But how did social studies texts from the 1860s treat African-Americans and the contributions they made to U.S. history?

Associate Professor Chara Bohan worked with Temple University’s Christine Woyshner on “Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865-2000,” a 10-chapter book filled with research on how social studies curriculum addressed race, from the mid-19th century to the present day.

“It’s very fascinating to think about how kids long ago really dealt with issues of different ethnic groups,” Bohan said. “We think that this is a new issue, but it’s not. When you look back in history, you realize some of these same issues were dealt with in the Progressive Era, in the 1920s and even now.”

Bohan and Woyshner’s book takes what Bohan calls a “ground-up” approach to social studies curriculum — asking researchers contributing to the book to write about what teachers and schools were teaching at the local, grassroots level, rather than solely focusing on national movements.

The resulting book offers perspectives from researchers across the country, who examine everything from culturally-relevant teaching in the Reconstruction Era to the 15-year fight to desegregate Atlanta Public Schools.
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For Bohan, one of the most fascinating chapters is one addressing how race was treated in elementary geography textbooks in South Carolina from the 1890s to the 1920s. Many chapters in the book incorporate photos and maps from old textbooks, and this one features a world map from an early 20th-century textbook that lists the predominant racial groups on each continent.

Each chapter brings to light the nuances of social studies education from specific eras in American history and the implications these nuances can have on teaching not just social studies, but all subject areas.

“I hope readers understand how race has impacted the curriculum in subtle and some not-so-subtle ways over the past century and a half,” she said. “I hope the book gives readers a new lens with which to view the curriculum – social studies curriculum in particular, but even the larger curriculum.”

Up and Coming . . .

College of Education faculty receive grant funding throughout the year to conduct groundbreaking research that contributes to the field of education. Highlighted are some of their most recent projects.

Mobile apps for treating voice disorders

Eva van Leer, assistant professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education’s Communication Sciences and Disorders program, received $75,000 from the ASHFoundation to test an interactive mobile iOS application she developed for individuals who have voice disorders.

“The app provides interactive feedback regarding their voice quality so that they can better assess whether they’re using their voice with good technique,” she explained.

Measuring stress in adults with language impairments

Jacqueline Laures-Gore, associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education’s Communication Sciences and Disorders program, received $25,000 from the Healthcare Innovation Program/Atlanta Clinical and Translational Research Seed Grant Program to explore the clinical effects of stress and depression in adults with aphasia, a language disorder someone develops following a neurological event, such as a stroke.

Laures-Gore will work with colleagues at the Georgia Institute of Technology and Grady Memorial Hospital to identify markers of stress and depression in the speech signal of adults with aphasia. This research could provide a more accurate tool for healthcare professionals to use when diagnosing stress and depression in adults with language impairments, she said.

Studying couples’ humility

Don Davis, assistant professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services, received a two-year, $250,000 grant from the Templeton Foundation to develop and compare several observational measures of humility in couples.

In addition, the project seeks to establish some of the social benefits of humility for relationships. For example, Davis and his team theorized that humility strengthens social bonds, buffers relationships from the strain of competitive traits and promotes long-term psychological and physical health. For more information about this research, visit http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2013/october-13/measuring-humility-and-its-positive-effects.html.