JustSouth Monthly
JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS

Number 159 August 2025

JSRI
JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS
ESTABLISHED 2007

Follow us on social media!

Upcoming Events

Loyola University New Orleans is hosting a Day of Remembrance commemorating the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. This collaborative event, organized by the English Department in partnership with the Jesuit Social Research Institute (JSRI) and the College of Law, Gillis Long Poverty Law Center, is bringing together members of various New Orleans communities for a day of reflection featuring scholarly presentations, literary readings, structured panel conversations, and oral history presentations centered on community responses during the Katrina era. This daylong event is being held in the Igantius Chapel on Loyola's campus today, Friday, August 29, 2025 from 9 AM to 5:30 PM. All are welcome to attend. Watch it live here. More information on the event here.

'The Trail They Blazed' is currently on display at the Historic New Orleans Collection. In this exhibit, leaders of the local Civil Rights Movement tell their stories of resistance in their own words. The exhibit features

Throwing Away Educators: The Post-Katrina New Orleans School Reforms

By Jesse Chanin

"Maybe if you were having a clothing store and you have a flood, you'd just throw all the clothes out and get some new ones. But you can't do that with children, and you can't do that with adults who work in those buildings."
–Brenda Mitchell, UTNO President, 1999–2008

"These were people that were stalwarts in the community, entrenched here, who wanted to spend their last years with their neighbors and their families in Gentilly or Mid-City, wherever, and they were completely uprooted in every sense of the word, and many haven't returned to this day. But I think right now it's long forgotten."
–Larry Carter, UTNO President, 2008–2016

In November 2005, just three months after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) fired 7,500 educators, including nearly 4,000 teachers. 71% of the teachers were Black. These post-Katrina dismissals represent the largest loss of Black teachers since *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark 1954 desegregation case that resulted in the closure of historically Black schools across the South. Just a third of the fired teachers returned to teach in Orleans Parish and, by 2013, only 22% remained employed by the district.[1]

These teacher dismissals were one piece of an elite-led restructuring of the district which created the nation's first all-charter school system by 2019.[2] Some researchers have lauded these reforms, pointing to increased student test scores and graduation rates.[3] But this analysis ignores the harm done to the educators who were fired and their families, the slow reopening of schools that prevented so many other families from returning, the foreclosure of opportunities for democratic participation in school and district policies, and the 20 years of institutional instability across the district.

quotes from JSRI's Twomey Scholar, Dr. Ronnie Moore. The multimedia exhibition immerses visitors in the movement with ambient musical recordings of songs sung by activists, audio excerpts from oral history interviews, archival news footage, stirring photography, an interactive voter registration test, and more. The voices of those who experienced it firsthand narrate the tremendous and often dangerous effort to transform Louisiana from a Jim Crow holdout into a more equitable place for all residents. Admission is free. On view until June 7, 2026. Located on the 3rd floor of the Historic New Orleans Collection, 520 Royal Street.

***Sew*cial Change: Sewing for a Cause.** Join Student Life and Ministry for a creative and compassionate gathering where sewing meets social justice. Together, we'll sew handmade items—like comfort pillows, dignity kits, and reusable bags—for local shelters, community centers, and those in need. Come connect with others, learn simple sewing skills, and contribute to projects that bring comfort and care to our wider community. All materials are provided—just bring your heart, your creativity, and that's all! Sundays 3–4:30PM in the Magis Lounge, Lower Level of Loyola's Danna Center.

Friends & Family of Louisiana's Incarcerated Parent Support Group. FFLIC is hosting a meeting for justice impacted parents and their supporters. Enjoy sound baths and fellowship in a casual and peaceful space. Refreshments are provided. September 24th 4:00–6:30 PM in the John Thompson Legacy Center at 1212 St. Bernard Ave. Text 504-237-6798 with questions.

New Orleans classroom caked in mud. Schools were 'woefully underfunded' for flood damage. June 2006. Photo by Wikimedia commons.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, stakeholders at the national, state, and local levels came together to redesign the district as a portfolio model of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly-funded and privately-governed schools, exempt from many of the regulations that govern traditional public schools. The state Legislature quickly passed Act 35, which allowed it to take over 102 of the city's 117 schools, firing the educators in the process. It was clear that state officials did not want the educators to return; in early September, they announced that Orleans Parish schools would be closed for the rest of the year and they encouraged educators to find other jobs. This move was ostensibly because of damaged buildings, but neighboring parishes opened public schools that fall, as did the Catholic Archdiocese.

Many of the dismissed educators were members of the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), a labor union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. Before Katrina, UTNO was the largest local in Louisiana and its membership was mostly Black women. UTNO sued the state to reopen schools, arguing that the delay was an attempt to prevent residents from returning to the city. Brenda Mitchell, former UTNO President, recalls, "Even the people in St. Bernard, who had as bad or worse time than us, opened their schools back up. We had to sue them...I don't think they wanted poor Black people to return to New Orleans."

The state finally opened its first school on the East Bank in January 2006, 5 months after Katrina.

The 19 years between the opening of that first school and today have been marked by instability and teacher turnover. As one journalist wrote, "school closures have become one of the city's ongoing winter traditions."[4] In addition to closing down, schools frequently switch charter networks, move to new buildings, change their names, and are consolidated. This results in confusion for parents, lack of consistency for children, and teachers who struggle to put down roots.

Connectedly, rates of teacher turnover nearly doubled between 2004 and 2013[5], resulting in a teacher shortage and a glut of inexperienced teachers with few veteran mentors to guide them. Opportunities for community input

Community Resilience Workshops. Join Love Your Neighbor Nola & Nola Black Mental Health Matters in free mental health workshops for parents and caregivers. You'll learn ways to handle stress, how to build a support system, and simple strategies to support yourself and your family. 2nd and 4th Saturdays 11AM–12PM at 5630 Crowder Blvd Suite 101. Registration reccomended, learn more here.

Career Opportunities

The Black School is hiring for their Design Activism Apprenticeship! This is a paid 6 month program where young creatives will be taught graphic design through real-world community-centered learning. The purpose of the program is to produce a Black self-directed and civically engaged professional with the ability to identify problems in their own community and present innovative design solutions. Read more about this opportunity here.

and participation in the schools have been severely curtailed; parents, teachers, and community members have little input into school decision making, as the schools are governed by private boards with minimal oversight by the district. Moreover, UTNO, a conduit for teacher voice, only has contracts at a handful of charter schools. Instead of staying and fighting to improve their schools, teachers and families tend to vote with their feet, seeking better opportunities elsewhere.

After Katrina, the state board of education president reflected, "The painful devastation of this national catastrophe became the opportunity, the catalyst, for change."[6] Yet that opportunity left so many behind—the fired educators and their families, the residents who couldn't return because no schools were open, and the children who learned, year after year, that their school was closing down and they had to find a new one. There have been improvements in the system, particularly in the last ten years, and every school in the district has a cadre of educators who care deeply about their students and work tirelessly on their behalf. But teachers often do that work in spite of–rather than supported by–their school and district administrations.

Former Orleans Parish teacher Juanita Bailey reflects, "I really feel for this new generation of teachers coming in because I don't understand how they are going to strengthen this profession, and get people to invest in it, if you are in a situation where you're treating them at-will, not investing in their professional development, not investing in having them at the table when you are making curriculum, deciding on schedules. I don't understand how you keep people in it." The post-Katrina New Orleans school reforms were predicated on the belief that teachers didn't matter–that they could easily be replaced en masse.

Through vicious union busting, unsustainable working conditions, limited avenues for educator voice, and precarious at-will contracts, that theme continues to characterize the school district today. Educators are the heart of the school system; we cannot have sustainable, successful schools until we grant them the respect, agency, and power they deserve.

[1] Barrett, Nathan and Douglas Harris. "Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce." Education Research Alliance, August 24, 2015.

[2] In August 2024, NOLA-PS opened a traditional, district-run school again: the Leah Chase School.

[3] Harris, Douglas. Charter School City: What the End of Traditional Public Schools in New Orleans Means for American Education. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

[4] Jewson, Marta. "'Tis the Season for School Closures." The Lens. December 10, 2024.

[5] Barrett, Nathan and Douglas Harris. "Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce." Education Research Alliance, August 24, 2015.

[6] Linda Johnson, "BESE Annual Report 2005-2006," P-2008-029 BESE Board Annual Reports 2005-7, Louisiana State Archives.

Dr. Chanin studies the connection between middle-class labor unions (such as the United Teachers of New Orleans, who were involved in education post-Katrina) and social justice struggles. She is a postdoctoral fellow at the Coalition for Compassionate Schools where she works on participatory action research projects with middle schoolers to improve their schools.

Published by the Jesuit Social Research Institute
Office Phone: 504- 864-7746 | **E-mail:** jsri@loyno.edu | **Website:** www.loyno.edu/jsri
Mailing Address: 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Campus Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118