

# African-Americans set pace for reform in public education

Critics believe vouchers are a “policy disaster” that will “destroy public education in America.” But a natural disaster has already wiped out public education in one American city, and its citizens are turning to vouchers to rebuild it. Who is right?

Hurricane Katrina obliterated the New Orleans public school system. A dramatic pro-choice experiment is now taking place, in which charter schools and competition are being relied on to solve a crisis of unimagined proportions. Money flows to families, who can send their children wherever they want. In the “Thirty Years War” over vouchers, New Orleans is a tremendous victory.

If the educational system defended by teachers’ unions and educrats is so fantastic, why is no one seriously arguing to rebuild it in New Orleans?

February is Black History Month. Two weeks ago, I promised I’d tell you about two African-Americans working for change by swimming upstream against the dominant black paradigm of separatism and unswerving loyalty to the public education establishment. Whites are now less than a third of the population of New Orleans; Katrina’s devastation fell disproportionately on blacks. So what happens next in New Orleans matters a great deal to American race relations.

If I were to honor two African-Americans for Black History Month, my choices would be Polly Williams and Daniel Hudson. Williams is a representative from Wisconsin who pushed through a



OPINION

**BARRY FAGIN**

Contributing columnist

voucher program for Milwaukee’s poorest children, at considerable political risk. Hudson is a principal who came to New Orleans from Washington, D.C., last September. He now runs Sarah Reed High School in New Orleans East, one of the toughest and lowest-performing schools in the city.

I’ve never met Williams personally. She’s a Democrat, so we probably disagree on several issues. But she had the guts to recognize that supporting the status quo isn’t as important as doing the right thing. The situation of Milwaukee’s urban poor (who are disproportionately African-American) was simply unacceptable, so she did something about it.

Milwaukee’s choice program is now one of the strongest in the nation; it’s so popular that no one would dare challenge it. And last I checked, the public education system in Milwaukee is still alive and kicking. It just has to work a little harder to justify its existence.

If the New Orleans experiment succeeds, African-American children in the Big Easy will owe a great debt to Williams. Without the political successes of programs like Milwaukee’s, the progressive experiment going on in New Orleans might never have been tried.

I first read of Daniel Hudson in last month’s Atlantic magazine, in an article I drew on for this column. A tough disci-

plinarian, he’s fighting what he calls “Big Easy behavior.” It’s become fashionable to argue that time is treated differently in black culture, and that educators should take that into account in their treatment of black children.

Hudson will have none of that. He roams the halls, challenging students who appear to be loitering, demanding that they be where they are supposed to when they are supposed to. All students, regardless of what color they are. Works for me.

The education experiment in New Orleans is unprecedented in American history. The neighborhood-funded school is gone. Parents have the complete freedom to send their child wherever they want, regardless of where they live. The money follows their child, period. In response, schools are springing up like wildfire: New Orleans now has the highest per capita ratio of charter schools of any city in America. This is what voucher advocates have waited years for.

No one knows how this will all turn out. Perfection is a dangerous distraction in politics: There’s only better and worse. But as Black History Month draws to a close, we’d do well to remember people such as Polly Williams and Daniel Hudson. If they can help warn African-American opinion leaders of the dangers of cultural separatism and the damage of monopoly schooling on the urban poor, they will have done all Americans a great service.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at [barry@faginfamily.net](mailto:barry@faginfamily.net).