

Evidence and Arguments on the New Orleans School Reforms

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Debating the Effects

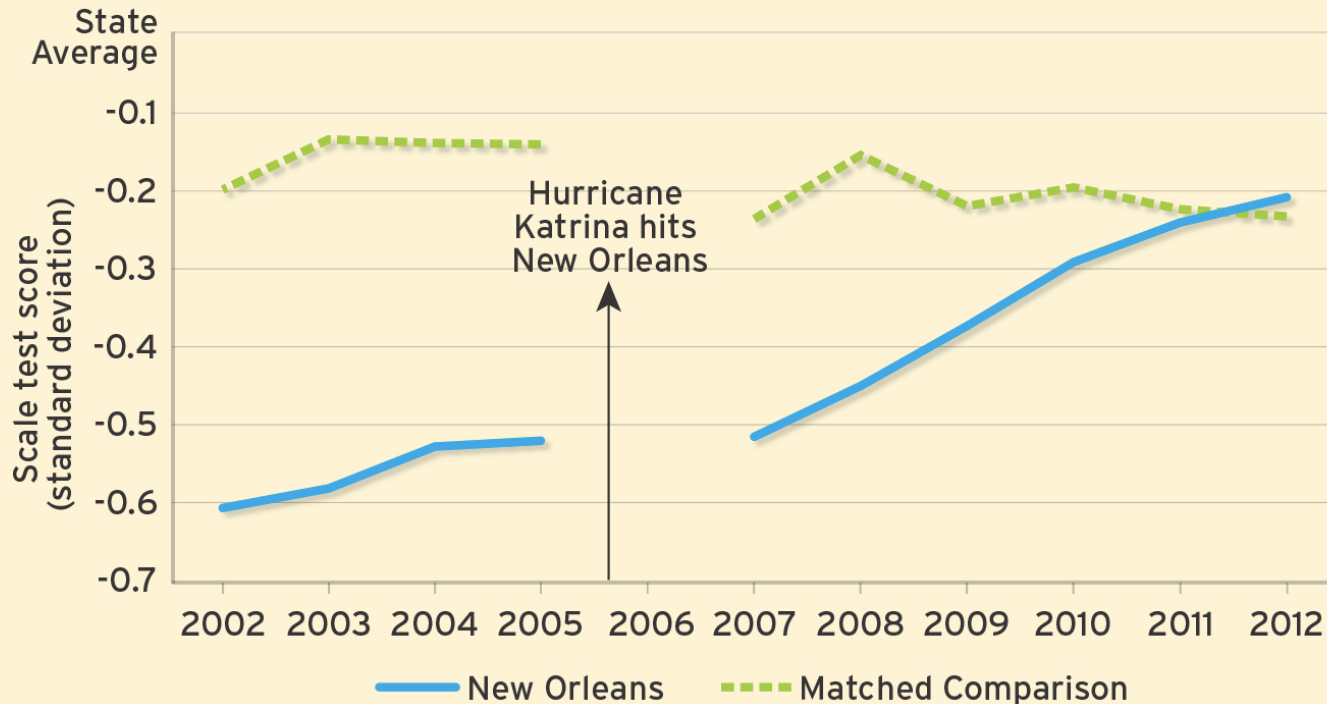
- Contentious debate
- Both sides going too far (see my Washington Post op-ed)
- Let's examine 5 types of arguments
 - *Arguments rooted in evidence*
 - *Arguments that ignore contrary evidence*
 - *Arguments with limited/contradictory evidence*
 - *Philosophical arguments*
 - *Other*

Main Argument for the Reforms

- Main argument is that it increased student outcomes on average
- Evidence points strongly in this direction
- We estimate average effects in the range of 0.2-0.4 s.d. (through 2012)
- Also suggestive evidence of large effects on high school graduation & college entry
- Very large, even compared w/ alternatives

Evidence of Effects

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NOTES: Separate analyses show that New Orleans students returning after the storm, who could be studied only through 2009, also made gains relative to their own prior performance, but these differences were often not statistically significant. Scale scores are averaged across grades 3 through 8 and across English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies. Scale scores are standardized so that zero refers to the statewide average.

SOURCE: Author's calculations

Strongest Arguments Against

- Context matters—it wouldn't work same elsewhere
 - *Distinctive student population*
 - *Very low pre-reform outcomes*
 - *Katrina rebuilding and school reform hub*
- False choice betw. “reforms” & “traditional model”
 - *Reasonable argument; we can only compare results of actually implemented policies, not hypothetical options*
 - *Though not clear what the third option looks like*
- Process has been undemocratic
- Process has deepened racial wounds

Arguments with Limited/ Contradictory Evidence

- Reform effects were inequitable
 - *Partly supported by evidence: Advantaged students seem to have benefited more*
 - *However, all groups seem to have benefited*
- We are measuring the wrong outcomes
 - *Maybe; we only have student-level data on test scores, though other measures point in same direction*
- Student outcome data have been manipulated
 - *Very little evidence of this in test data*
 - *But audit data suggest inaccurate out-of-state transfers*
- Most parents want neighborhood schools

Weakest Arguments Against

- No real effects of reforms, just population change
- It was all about extra resources, not “reforms”
- State is creating a moving target with proficiency cut-offs and school grades
- Data access is too political
- Student outcome levels are still dismal
 - *Also inconsistent with argument that we are measuring the wrong outcomes*

Conclusion

- It has been an ugly process that, so far, has generated good results
- Hard to make a case against the reforms based on existing empirical evidence
 - *Thought experiment: Suppose we had found it was all population change (no reform effect) & incr. segregation*
 - *What conclusion would you have drawn then?*
- We need more evidence (coming soon)
- Should not lose sight of other arguments—we should be evidence-based, but still have to think

The Larger Debate

- The New Orleans debate, in most ways, is the national debate
 - *Same reform principles*
 - *Same specifics (charters, vouchers, etc.)*
 - *Same philosophical divide*
- But have to keep it in perspective
 - *On one hand, New Orleans forces us to rethink what a public education system can look like*
 - *On the other, context matters and others should be careful before following the New Orleans playbook—especially on process*