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The Legacy of William Frantz Public School: Commemoration vs. Celebration

By Connie L. Schaffer, Martha Graham Viator, and Meg White

Sixty years ago, Ruby Bridges, a Black first-grade student, entered the all-White William Frantz Public School (WFPS). Her entry into WFPS represented a massive transformation in public education in the United States and embedded the school in the U.S. civil rights movement. Fifteen years ago, following Hurricane Katrina, the rapid increase in charter schools in New Orleans centered WFPS in a second transformation, the movement to reform public education. In addition to these two seminal events, a more complete history of WFPS provides justification that these landmark transformations be commemorated rather than celebrated.

Introduction

Anniversaries prompt reexamination of significant moments in the past as well as what transpired in the years following the original events. In 2020, two important anniversaries of transformation coincide for William Frantz Public School (WFPS), a school nestled in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. These anniversaries call for more than the typical nostalgic celebrations associated with historic milestones in which individuals or communities overcame obstacles. They call for commemorations that include remembering the complexities of events.

School Desegregation and Hurricane Katrina

Twice since opening in 1938, WFPS epitomized substantial changes within public education. First, in November 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges walked up the steps of WFPS. Bridges, the first Black student to attend the formerly segregated, all-White school, encountered jeering crowds of protestors every day as she entered the building. WFPS became a focal point in the post-Brown v Topeka¹ evolution of American public education as front-page photographs, television coverage, and eventually the art of Norman Rockwell published in *Look Magazine* brought images of Bridges (Rockwell, 1964), WFPS, and school desegregation into millions of American homes. To many, WFPS symbolized a critical chapter in American public education. In fact, the National Register of Historic Places (2005) acknowledged the importance of WFPS, including it on its list of significant historic locations in the United States.

Fifteen years ago, WFPS experienced a second transformation. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and heavily damaged nearly every public school in the city, including WFPS. Fortunately, the National Registry designation spared WFPS from being demolished, and the building was eventually restored. As part of the recovery from Katrina, WFPS transformed to a charter school.²

The Case for Commemoration

Events at WFPS in 1960 are often viewed as the embodiment of the U.S. civil rights movement. For much of the school year, Bridges and her family, the students and teachers at WFPS, and officials from New Orleans Public Schools endured the difficult and at times dangerous day-to-day life involved in desegregation. Throughout the years, and particularly on landmark anniversaries, news outlets published retrospections on these events (Bridges Hall, 2000; Dequine, 2010; Jerome & Ridenour, 1995; Reckdahl, 2010). Along with children's books published by Bridges (1999), a psychiatrist who supported her (Coles & Ford, 1995), and a

Disney movie (Hopkins, 1998), the accounts celebrated the bravery and accomplishments of Bridges, her parents, and her teacher. It is common to view these stories as sufficient reminders of the past and evidence of progress toward racial equality in the United States (Cashion, 2019; Hall, 2005).

However, framing these recollections from only a celebratory perspective truncates a complete examination of school desegregation and masks evidence of pervading systemic racism. Americans can ill afford such naivete and must examine the complexity of numerous, evolving educational challenges in the decades following Bridges' entry into WFPS (Schaffer et al., 2018).

Stories of Bridges' courage and that of her family and others supporting school desegregation primarily focus on the noteworthy bravery of a few individuals and less on the vitriol of many White parents, community leaders, and ardent segregationists.³ However, the level of hatred publicly exhibited outside WFPS each day before and after school, as well as the intimidation that occurred under the cover of night, revealed deeply-embedded racism that also deserves attention (Jeansonne, 1977; Louisiana State Advisory Committee [LSAC] to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1961; Wieder, 1983–1984, 1985, 1988).

This racism seeped into every level of government. Ample sources document the political and legal maneuvers of local and state officials hoping to keep schools in New Orleans segregated and to perpetuate the legacy of systemic racism in education (Baker, 1996; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991; Louis, Bowles, & Grace, 1971; LSAC, 1961). Even after the court-ordered desegregation of 1960, it would take an additional 7 years before New Orleans Public Schools moved to desegregate its high schools (Stern, 2016) and over 10 years before district teachers were desegregated (Cortez, 1996). Ignoring the indomitably ingrained social and political forces that not only tolerated but affirmed White supremacy minimizes the oppression of those who were targeted.

Like government officials, White parents also attempted to keep White and Black students apart. White parents withdrew their children from WFPS and enrolled them in state-subsidized private schools within hours of Bridges' arrival at the school. Following this immediate exodus, a more turbid, long-lasting reaction eventually resegregated New Orleans' public schools as increasing numbers of White parents enrolled their children in private schools. White families also moved out of New Orleans, shifting the racial demographics of the city and accelerating the resegregation of WFPS and other public schools (Baker, 1996; Matsumaru, 2011; Wieder, 1985, 1988).

During the 1970s, loss of key industries in New Orleans and the geographic isolation caused by the new interstate system that severed the Ninth Ward from other parts of the city dramatically impacted the neighborhood surrounding WFPS. As a result, Black middle-class families migrated out of the area to be closer to employment opportunities. At the same time, unemployment, crime, and drugs crept into the community. As the neighborhood changed, WFPS faced enormous challenges to educate increasing numbers of poor students living within a very difficult environment (BondGraham, 2007; Campanella, 2010; Landphair, 2007; Matsumaru, 2011; Stern, 2016).

New variances of systemic racism impacted students as school district records revealed Black students as overrepresented in disciplinary actions and underrepresented in elite academic magnet programs (Committee to Study the Status of The Black Male in New Orleans Public Schools, 1988; Garibaldi, 1992, 2007). Despite an extensive review of concerns and recommendations for change in the early 1980s, racialized discipline practices persisted for

decades, and Black students continued to be suspended more often and for longer periods of time than White students (Barrett et al., 2018; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006-2007). Other racist policies and practices created barriers that prevented Black students from enrolling in magnet schools—schools the press referred to as “glamour schools” (Kelso, 1992; Nabonne, 1998a, 1998b).

As accountability movements swept across the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, the State of Louisiana began issuing school report cards. The report cards for WFPS included demoralizing labels such as “Academically Unacceptable” and “School in Decline.” Louisiana assigned these labels based on an accountability formula weighted almost solely on test scores and with no account for the tremendous social challenges confronting the students who attended WFPS (Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana Believes, 1997–2005).

The inflammatory labeling of schools along with leadership instability and district-wide corruption eroded public trust in WFPS and other schools in New Orleans. In 2003, the Louisiana Department of Education created the Recovery School District. Seen by some as the only means to reform education, the new governance system created a bureaucratic infrastructure to support the expansion of charter schools and specifically targeted schools in New Orleans (Boselovic, 2014; Garda, 2011).

Based on low test scores, district officials decided to close WFPS in 2005. The closure came just months after the school’s recognition on the National Register and only weeks before Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Following Katrina, the New Orleans Public School Board relinquished control of nearly all its schools to the Recovery School District, which immediately moved to increase the number of charter schools and set a long-term goal to create an all-charter model of public education in the city (Goff, 2009; Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education, 2008; United Teachers of New Orleans [UTNO], Louisiana Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers, 2006).

High-ranking officials purported that Katrina provided an ideal opportunity to reform public education in New Orleans and granted the Recovery School District unprecedented authority to transform public education within the city (Anderson, 2010; Gewertz, 2005; Nagin, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In reality, the concept of this model was well-established before the hurricane. Katrina simply allowed opportunists to create a market-driven model of education quickly in New Orleans and then proclaim it as a model for public education in other locations (Au et al., 2006; UTNO, 2006).

After converting every P-12 school into a charter school, the Recovery School District transitioned authority back to the New Orleans Public School Board in 2018. By this time, the WFPS building had been restored, and Akili Academy, a charter school, occupied the building. A private board of directors now sets admission policies, makes educational decisions regarding the curriculum, hires teachers, and carefully monitors test scores (Jabbar, 2015; Williams, 2013). The wording “William Frantz Public School” that appears over the famed doorway Bridges entered is protected by the building’s historic designation. However, the door no longer serves as the focal point for those who enter the school. Rather students and visitors use a new entrance that provides no indication the building is a public school.

Conclusion

Ironically, at one of America’s most celebrated public schools, the concept of *public* education is now difficult to discern. Yes, significant events—school desegregation in 1960 and the recovery following Hurricane Katrina in 2005—that impacted WFPS should be

commemorated. Yet a more complete history of WFPS provides sobering reminders of evolving challenges within public education and gives cause to temper any celebration.

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¹ In the landmark 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional.

² In the United States, the structure of charter schools varies by state. In the State of Louisiana, charter schools are independent schools that receive public funding, but school finances, operations, and administration are governed by private boards of directors.

³ Widespread reports and documentation of racial epithets and threats directed at Bridges and others can be found in newspapers and public statements made by individuals, many of whom were considered to be community leaders. A White mother protesting outside of WFPS daily told Bridges she planned to poison her (Bridges, 1999; Coles, 1995). At public gatherings, speakers referred to desegregation as the mongrelizing of races and urged White parents to demand the continuation of racially segregated school in order to avoid their daughters being “raped by these Congolese” (*Times-Picayune*, 1960).

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