

Policy Report: Considering the Impact of Education Reform on High-Risk Neighborhoods

Executive Summary

Equity in All Places (formerly Orleans Parish Place Matters) uses the Social Determinants of Health framework to advocate place-based policies that create equitable, safe, and healthy communities. The new policy report, “Considering the Impact of Education Reform on High-Risk Neighborhoods,” examines school performance scores, school and student stability, and suspension rates in eight New Orleans neighborhoods with the lowest life expectancy and highest health disparities. Using a race and equity lens, the report analyzes the potential adverse impact of education reform on the city’s most vulnerable residents: those in predominately Black communities, living in higher concentrations of poverty, experiencing greater health disparities and with lower educational attainment. The data reveals that the schools located in the eight targeted high-risk neighborhoods continue to struggle with low performance, high suspension rates, and transient student populations. Additionally, these neighborhoods have been forced to deal with numerous school closures, turnover and other disruptions in the past three years. The report also highlights concerns about the loss of self-determination in Black communities, high suspension rates coupled with oppressive school environments, and the lack of cultural connection and understanding of new teachers. The report’s findings suggest that education reform is negatively impacting the city’s most vulnerable communities.

Findings

The approach of the report is to answer three specific questions:

1. How are schools in these predominantly Black neighborhoods performing?
2. What are the suspension rates of the schools in these neighborhoods?
3. What is the stability of the schools and student populations in these neighborhoods?

How are schools in these predominantly Black neighborhoods performing?

The majority of the schools in the eight high-risk neighborhoods continue to perform poorly. Half of schools in high-risk neighborhoods have School Performance Scores (SPS) of ‘D’ or ‘F’. Three schools have ‘B’ scores and there are no

'A' schools. Five schools increased their SPS letter grade while six schools decreased their SPS letter grade since our 2014 report. Moreover, it is important to note that our organization's previous 2014 report, which also focused on the impact of school choice on students in high-risk neighborhoods, concluded that children who lived in high-risk neighborhoods with low performing schools were being bused to other neighborhoods to attend low performing schools.ⁱ This demonstrates that choices continue to be limited for parents and students in high-risk neighborhoods.

What are the suspension rates of the schools in these neighborhoods?

The schools located in the eight high-risk neighborhoods in New Orleans continue to struggle with high suspension rates, which not only limits opportunities for our youth but also put students and neighborhoods at risk. The average out-of-school suspension rate for Louisiana local education agencies (LEAs) was 8.3%, but many of the schools in these neighborhoods exceed that rate, and some are suspending as many as a one out of four and one out of five students. Across the state, suspension rates are higher among students of color, particularly African American males. Moreover, stricter policies coupled with increasing numbers of White teachers and administrators without connections to the communities in which they work has aggravated racial tensions and raised questions of cultural competency.

What is the stability of the schools and student populations in these neighborhoods?

An examination of the student stability and schools transitions makes it clear that the eight high-risk neighborhoods are experiencing a lot of disruption. Seven of the twenty schools in the neighborhoods have a student stability score of less than 66%, meaning that a third of their students did not return from one year to the next. Half of schools experienced a decrease in student stability in the past two years. Moreover, the neighborhoods have lost eleven schools—six closed and five moved from the neighborhoods—while only six new ones opened.

Conclusion

When we view the data through a lens of race and equity, we can see that the city's most vulnerable residents are not reaping the benefits of education reform that are touted in a narrative that focuses on the majority. On the contrary, education reform might be creating additional risks for communities that are already high-risk. Additionally, it is clear that reform has aggravated sentiments of disempowerment and lack of self-determination in Black communities and also has led to the loss of critical community and cultural assets, such as neighborhood schools and homegrown teachers. These consequences raise serious concerns about the race and class dynamics of education reform.

ⁱ Orleans Parish Place Matters. (2014). Place matters for education in Orleans Parish: a community health equity report on educational policies. New Orleans, LA.