

New Schools, Old Problems

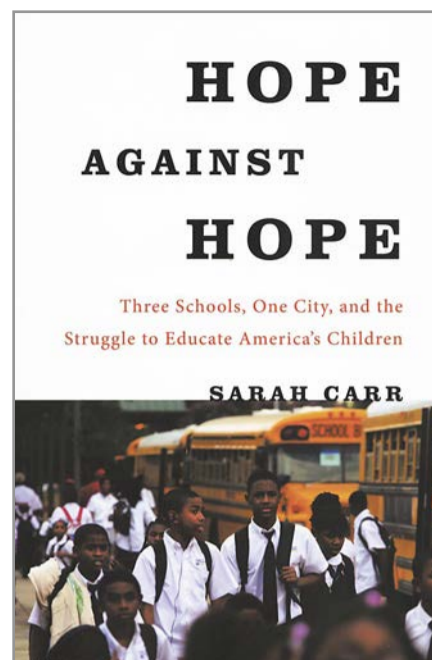
HOPE AGAINST HOPE:

THREE SCHOOLS, ONE CITY, AND THE STRUGGLE TO EDUCATE AMERICA'S CHILDREN

REVIEWED BY **P. L. THOMAS**

NEW ORLEANS SURVIVED HURRICANE KATRINA in 2005 only to experience a second flood, this time as educators from outside the city spilled in to reform its schools. Though not all shuttered classroom buildings had been damaged, reformers saw the storm as an opportunity to rebuild the school system. Many of the city's historically struggling public schools were closed or converted into charter institutions. These new charters, heavily staffed by young Teach for America (TFA) recruits creamed from elite colleges to serve two-year stints and other educators with similar philosophies, emphasize testing and curtail extracurricular activities in favor of college preparation.

Sarah Carr, an education reporter for more than a decade, most recently for *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, set out to discover how this transition from local control to “technocratic gover-



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nance” would play out in a city whose “decayed infrastructure, overwhelmed social services, long-simmering racial tensions, and gross inequalities make it perversely American.” The potential for tension was heightened by the fact that most of the young educators hired to teach in the new, state-run Recovery School District were white, while 90 percent of the public school student body is composed of African-American children. From 2010 through 2012, Carr shadowed three people representing three schools: Geraldlynn Stewart, who was a 14-year-old charter-school freshman at the start of Carr’s research; TFA recruit and Harvard graduate Aidan Kelly; and charter school principal Mary Laurie.



SUSAN POAG PHOTOGRAPHY

Raquel Dillon with her daughter, Geraldynn, who wears a KIPP school uniform. Dillon hoped the school's focus on academics—maintained through chants, finger snapping, and strict enforcement of rules—would give her daughter opportunities she'd lacked. Dillon's faith faltered as the school's culture failed to connect with students.

Geraldynn, who attends Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Renaissance High School, expresses ambivalence about her education, complaining about the school's strictness. No-excuses ideologies such as those embraced by KIPP place an emphasis on discipline and an intense culture of personal responsibility in which teachers and students are held accountable for outcomes that

critics have warned are often beyond the control of either. But Geraldynn's mother, who works two jobs and is determined to ensure that her daughter has access to the best schools the two of them can find, likes the KIPP school's approach.

Kelly teaches at new charter school Sci Academy, a hyper-regimented "technocrat's dream: run by graduates of the nation's most elite institutions, steeped in data, always seeking precision, divorced from the messiness—and checks and balances—of democracy." Kelly personifies the "missionary zeal" of TFA recruits. But his ideals clash with the reality of day-to-day schooling. His self-esteem often wilts under

his students' lack of interest (or success) in the lessons he has spent hours crafting.

Laurie, a New Orleans native, emerges as a survivor. Once a young unwed mother, she returned to college after giving birth and eventually raised four children, only to lose two of them to gun violence. She was a successful public school educator before Katrina, but lost her job when the school district laid off public

school teachers and neutralized the teachers' unions. O. Perry Walker, the charter school Laurie heads, gave her a new start, but not without complications. Having taught in public schools her whole professional career, Laurie had concerns about the charter takeover of so many of the city's schools. But her dedication to education won out.

Education journalism often offers facile solutions. Some writers champion "miracle schools" as the way to close the achievement gap as well as raise the test scores and graduation rates of low-income students. And several recent books have held out "grit" as the solution for kids who come from underachieving communities, arguing that teachers should demand that students develop a personal drive to overcome all obstacles by neither offering nor accepting excuses—see, for example, Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed* and *Whatever It Takes*, David Kirp's *Improbable Scholars*, and Jay Mathews's *Work Hard. Be Nice*.

Carr casts a critical eye on simplistic policies that embrace school choice and competition as the primary tools for reform while ignoring the complicated problem of child poverty, though she offers nuanced praise when reformers succeed. For example, she approvingly describes the Cherokee legend taught

at KIPP in which everyone embodies a good wolf and a bad wolf. "The fable's power over [the students'] actions," Carr writes, "seemed to suggest that appealing to a person's higher self, no matter whether they are young teenagers or adults, carries more influence than rules or demerits ever could."

For schools to succeed, says Carr, "the education they offer must become an extension of the will of a community—not a result of its submission."

Carr's reporting is some of the best education reform journalism to date, largely because it is rooted in individuals' stories, which have often been lost amid the relentless focus on data since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act and high-stakes testing. Through Laurie, she articulates some of the core challenges facing the education reform movement: "I think we've done good work, but I don't know that the numbers (test scores, attendance, and graduation rates) will always reflect our good work because of the kids

we take on,' said Laurie, referring to the fact that the school accepts some of the city's most challenged and challenging students." Laurie's concern parallels the often-ignored problem at the center of universal public education in the United States, a system created to serve any and all students equally, regardless of background.

While Carr challenges education reform and the limits of good intentions among KIPP and TFA advocates, she also grounds her confrontations in a larger commitment: "At times, both KIPP's staunchest supporters and its fiercest critics insult and demean the very families they purport to protect by assuming they, and they alone, know what is best for other people's children."

Hope Against Hope is a cautionary tale about reformers honoring market-based

models over democratic values by stressing indirect change through choice and competition instead of directly reforming failing public institutions. In the book's epilogue, Carr offers this advice: "If the schools want to succeed in the long run, the education they offer must become an extension of the will of a community—not a result of its submission." For anyone seeking to understand U.S. education and education reform, Carr's story of New Orleans is an essential place to start. ■

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