

New Orleans public schools elicit scrutiny and hope

June 23, 2015 8:45 AM Mary Ann Travis
mtravis@tulane.edu





Paul Hill, founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, and Meria Carstarphen, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools and a Tulane University graduate, discuss the future of urban education at the Tulane Education Research Alliance conference in New Orleans on Friday, June 19. Below, Carstarphen, Henry Levin, professor of economics and education at Columbia University, and Kathleen Padian, deputy superintendent of the Orleans Parish School Board, continue the discussion. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

“The cornerstone of our democracy is this thing called public education.” That’s the view of Meria Carstarphen, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools and a Tulane University graduate.

In all the discussion of public education reform this essential principle should be kept in mind, said Carstarphen. “When we mess with the core purpose of public education, it undermines what we are as a nation.”

Carstarphen spoke on Friday (June 19) at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown New Orleans as part of a three-day conference, "The Urban Education Future? Lessons From New Orleans 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina," organized by the [Education Research Alliance](#) at Tulane. Approximately 300 people attended the conference.

With post-Katrina New Orleans public schools and their radical transformation into an almost all-charter school system the centerpiece of the conference, [Douglas Harris](#), economics professor and director of the ERA, noted that conversations often veered to the issue of innovation at the system level as opposed to innovation in the classroom and in instruction and "how those are two different things."

Whether lessons learned from the New Orleans public schools' experiment can be transferred to other school systems remains to be seen. While New Orleans public schools have made academic strides, students still perform below the national average. The Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, a Tulane partner of the ERA, released a [report](#) last week about the academic gains made by New Orleans public school students.

Paul Hill, a research professor at the University of Washington and director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, said, "We are all trying to say, how do we educate our kids better? How do we make sure we are always in a framework of looking for where kids have been neglected and failed, and what are the options to do better for them?"



“We are all trying to say, how do we educate our kids better?”—Paul Hill, panelist at the Education Research Alliance conference on the future of urban education