

More than an Anniversary

A preview of William Frantz Public School: A Story of Race, Resistance, Resiliency, and Recovery in New Orleans

William Frantz Public School: A Story of Race, Resistance, Resiliency, and Recovery in New Orleans will be released by Peter Lang in 2020. The book examines issues related to public education through events at the iconic William Frantz Public School, one of the first New Orleans public schools to be desegregated in 1960. The book covers important topics such as the resegregation of public schools, systemic racism, poverty, school accountability movements, and proliferation of charter schools.

By: Connie Schaffer, Meg White, and Martha Viator

Sixty years ago, Ruby Bridges entered William Frantz Public School as its first Black student. Most Americans recognize photographs of the momentous day in November 1960 or know the pop culture version of these events as chronicled in Norman Rockwell's art, children's books, and a made-for-TV Disney movie. Coupled with its designation on the National Register of Historic Places, these familiar images secure Frantz's rightful place in the history of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

The upcoming 60th anniversary of Bridges' entry into Frantz provides opportunities to re-examine school desegregation as well as other phenomena that impacted the school and public education in New Orleans. Bridges passed through a throng of angry protestors outside Frantz only to enter a school harboring deep-seated racism. School board members and administrators reluctantly opened the doors to Bridges after years of fighting legal battles to maintain segregated schools. The Frantz staff



Photograph by Mandy Liu

ostracized Bridges and her teacher, Barbara Henry, and all but a handful of the school's white students transferred to segregated schools.

In the following decade, the overt racism of 1960 morphed into more subtle but still damaging forms of racism. Frantz became surrounded with what *The New Orleans*

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Times-Picayune described as urban decay. The impact of poverty, unemployment, neglected public housing, crime, and drugs—all fueled by systemic racism in the school district, city, and the state—permeated the walls of Frantz as well as most public schools in New Orleans. Those who could,

mostly white and middle class residents, moved out of the Ninth Ward en masse during the 1970s.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Frantz epitomized all that plagued New Orleans Public Schools. The decay of the 1970s went unchecked. Literally, it compromised the integrity of the building. Figuratively, it deteriorated academic performance as efforts of teachers and students proved no match for social inequities, underfunded public education, and the test-crazed school accountability movement sweeping the United States.

The State of Louisiana issued report cards for Frantz with demoralizing labels such as “Academically Unacceptable” and “School in Decline”. Ultimately, school officials announced Frantz's closure. In August 2005, teachers and students packed boxes of books and materials and prepared to move to a nearby school. Within days, Hurricane Katrina devastated Frantz and nearly every public school in New Orleans.

Following Katrina, public education in New Orleans shifted to the oversight of the Recovery School District and an all-charter school model. Often touted as a necessary response to the consequences of Katrina, the origins of charter schools actually date back to 1960 when cooperative schools (private schools seeking public funding) sprung up as a reaction to school desegregation. Likewise, the name “Recovery School District” implied a response to Katrina. What many Americans fail to realize is that the Louisiana Department of Education established the

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Recovery District prior to the hurricane as a means to take over schools it deemed as failing —schools like Frantz. Katrina simply provided the catalyst for long-waiting opportunists to seize control of public education in New Orleans.

The history of Frantz spared it from post-Katrina demolition, but several years passed before the school reopened as Akili Academy, a charter school governed by a private board of directors. When students finally returned to the storied building, teachers referred to the children as scholars, a term overly-focused on academic prowess. A bright sign welcomes these scholars to Akili Academy. Although architecturally preserved on the exterior walls, the former name, William Frantz Public School, only remains visible in faded letters above a rarely-used side entrance.

By 2020, the Recovery School District returned control of Akili Academy and most other charter schools to the New Orleans Public School Board. Like Akili Academy, the “public” aspect of the school system is increasingly difficult to discern in the complicated private-public charter model of education. Schools now open and close based on test scores rather than community needs, and private boards determine how public funds are spent.

So when you see the inevitable retrospections regarding events of 1960, celebrate the school desegregation Bridges began. But do so with the recognition that public education in New Orleans is being rebranded into a very different type of educational system than what Bridges likely envisioned.