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INTERVIEW: MICHAEL MOLINA

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# Privatization and the Katrina solution

May 28, 2008

**Michael Molina** was born and raised in New Orleans and is now national co-coordinator of Quality Education is a Constitutional Right, formerly based in New Orleans and now in Atlanta. The organization has started a campaign for a federal amendment guaranteeing access to quality public education. Michael talked to **Gillian Russom and Sarah Knopp** about the situation of New Orleans schools today.

## CAN YOU explain what "privatization" looks like in New Orleans?

THREE WEEKS after the storm, one of the first state actions was they fired all the unionized teachers, disbanded the school board and turned the schools over to a state receiver in Baton Rouge. So they immediately removed community accountability to public education, and the union was broken.

Margaret Spelling, the secretary of education, dumped \$24 million into New Orleans, but it wasn't allowed to go into public schools. It went to the charter schools.

So they snatched power from people. The school board before wasn't a great school board, but it was the only democratic body where a parent could walk up and say, "Hey, something's wrong with the schools."

Kids were out of school for two years, going to schools in three different cities in a school year. And since then, more than 50 percent of the schools in New Orleans to reopen are charters, the highest percent of privatization anywhere in the country. So really, the only options are charter schools.

They created a three-tier system. The "recovery schools," which is the former school board-run system, now run by the state. They did reopen the New Orleans public school system, and they started the charter school system. The best schools and the best-funded schools are the charter schools. The recovery system gets the second-best funding, and the former New Orleans public schools go without.



## WHAT'S THE difference between the recovery schools and the New Orleans public schools?

LEGALLY, THE New Orleans Public Schools are required to take in all students. Recovery schools are

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Michael Molina (Sarah Knopp | SW)

can't get in.

mandated to take all students, but they are allowed a lot more freedom.

In the charter school structure, they include all these mechanisms for weeding out students. They can put you out if your academic history doesn't live up to what they expect. If your parents are coming in and having interactions with teachers that they deem negative, you

If you have any suspensions, the head of the charter school has complete discretion about what the disciplinary standards are. So they could say, "We'll take students who were never expelled," or they could say, "We'll take students who never had detention more than three times." New Orleans public schools have to take everybody else.

### WHAT'S IT like in the schools now?

I WAS a product of public schools. I went to magnet schools in New Orleans. The magnet school that I went to, the best school in the state, is now a charter school. It wasn't flooded out, so now it's filled back up with students, but under a charter system.

There's another school, which was a Black school, that got taken by Tulane. They turned it into a charter, and now it's basically only for the kids of Tulane professors. It's a beautiful old building, and now all these renovations that never would have happened before the storm are happening.

There are schools that have more security guards than certified teachers. At one school, it's a 45-minute process to get into the school every morning. There are bag checks, searches, metal detectors. Blackwater security, which killed all the people in Iraq--a mercenary force and private contractor--they've been hired to do security in the New Orleans Public Schools.

### IT SEEMS like someone had a pretty elaborate plan for privatization. Do you think they cooked it up ahead of time?

THERE ARE folks who've been at it for a long time, like this Eli Broad character or Bill Gates--the people at the top who are dumping the money in. And then there are the ideologues and the think tanks.

People have been working to privatize the system since the Reagan era. It started with starving the public education system and every other institution that had any social benefit. At the same time, they were funding the conservative think tanks, which had these philosophers and sociologists who were claiming that a business model was needed in education. Those forces have been at work for a long time, going around

### WHAT ELSE TO READ

Many of the issues discussed at the Trination Conference and in these interviews are taken up in a paper written by Steve Miller and Jack Gerson, "[The Corporate Surge Against Public Schools.](#)"

For a more general look at the imposition of neoliberal economic policies, read Naomi Klein's most recent book [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism.](#)

Jonathan Kozol has written numerous books exposing unequal conditions in U.S. schools, including [Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools](#) and [The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America.](#)

Kozol's interview in the *International Socialist Review*, "[Change can't come without protest,](#)" takes up the issues in his books, plus the question of education activism.

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from state to state to get measures passed.

What they did was take advantage of the opportunity of a wiped-out city to come in and make it their laboratory. It's a litmus test. It's a battleground. They went down there with millions of storm troopers and took the school system with no resistance, because the population was gone, the public was gone, the teachers were gone.

### **THERE WERE some instances of resistance, right?**

THERE WAS a school named Martin Luther King in the Lower 9th Ward, and they refused to open when the people came back. So the parents and teachers went in and cleaned the school out, and started teaching. They kind of squatted there.

It became this national story, and then they came in and dumped a bunch of money. But they turned it into a charter school. They said, "We'll give you all the money you need if you become a charter school." So what could they say? There's no school within 20 miles. There was no other choice. Since the federal government had abdicated responsibility, the only source of funds was private.

### **WHERE DID you come up with the idea to build a movement for a federal constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to quality public education?**

BOB MOSES, who was a civil rights leader, was the one who made the call in 2005 to get people together to talk. The slogan "Quality Education is a Constitutional Right" emerged out of that meeting.

If you're talking about the constitution, you're talking about the basic nature of being a human being in America. We wanted to move it away from the idea that you're a rugged individual into the idea that you're a citizen of the community. A citizen is everyone here working and living, including the undocumented.

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