

Cover Story

By

In the Bensonhurst neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where John Alford grew up, the Italian kids lived in the townhouses and the black kids lived in the housing projects. Alford's neighborhood was the Marlborough Homes project. The kids all went to the same public school, but that was as far as it went. The Italians far outnumbered the blacks, and most of the time Alford just tried to make it through the day. His enthusiasm for math and his dutifully prepared homework assignments didn't exactly win over his peers, many of whom seemed more interested in the fights on the bus than learning their arithmetic.

When Alford was 14, a young black kid in the neighborhood named Yusef Hawkins was killed by a white mob. The year was 1989. Hawkins' death ignited racial tensions in Bensonhurst and the entire city of New York, but to Alford, the news of white kids fighting with black kids was nothing new.

His mother kept such a close watch over him that Alford was never allowed to have friends over to the house, or vice versa. During the dog days of summer, Alford and his younger brothers tagged along in their father's Department of Social Services car while he snapped photos of the elderly and disabled unable to come in for their food stamp identification cards. It inevitably led them into all the city's housing projects. Alford's dad kept a knife close at hand for protection.

Alford eventually moved on from his neighborhood elementary school to Brooklyn Tech, a magnet high school that attracted a lot of ambitious Asian immigrants. He had college in his sights, but his future remained uncertain -- except that teaching

and going back to the projects were not part of the plan.

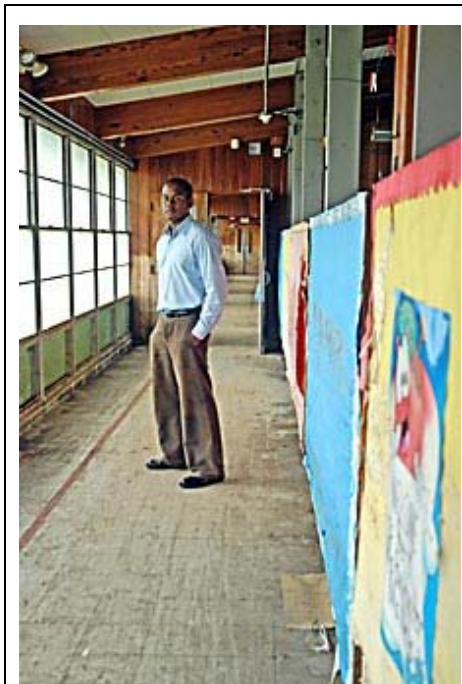
Until now.

Today Alford, 32, is preparing to open the Langston Hughes Academy, a new charter school that will serve New Orleans kids who came up in circumstances similar to his in Bensonhurst. Earning a Harvard M.B.A. and running an in-house consultant team for General Motors for three years apparently were just pit stops for Alford, who decided to make public education his career. Before coming to New Orleans, he helped open new charter schools for the nonprofit Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), one of the nation's largest charter school developers and operators. He says his prior careers combine with New Orleans' current educational landscape in a way that empowers him to make this move.

He is not alone.

Throughout the course of rebuilding New Orleans' public schools post-Katrina, the education sector has bucked the "brain drain" trend by attracting a slew of degree-laden young professionals who have opted out of the business world or prestigious educational positions elsewhere to play major roles in bringing back New Orleans schools. These young educators, most of them affiliated with

charter schools, hardly consider themselves saviors of local public education; all the same, they hold positions of critical responsibility and importance to the success of New Orleans' charter-dominated school system. They are haunted by twin demons: the daunting task of turning around a broken public education system in New Orleans and the stigma of being yet another cadre of reformers who have, for the most part, come and gone over the past 40 years. They serve on the front line in the war of ideas that rages in American education reform today.



John Alford traded a promising career in the automotive industry for one in public education, opening several KIPP charter schools before making his way to New Orleans. He stands in the hall at Langston Hughes Academy in Mid-City, which is still undergoing renovations.

At the core of that reform effort has been a concerted effort to lure young professionals like Alford into the fold of urban public education. Instead of stay-at-home moms and life-long academics, organizations like Teach For America have led the charge by successfully recruiting top-drawer Ivy Leaguers, business school graduates and other professional types away from the homogeneity of the corporate world and engaging them at the forefront of public education. The effort has created a new class of young educators who carry into the classroom and school board rooms many of the same business-world values that they absorbed in their old jobs: an obsession with data-driven results, a workaholic mentality and an emphasis on the entrepreneurial spirit.

"I really had no intention of ever coming back here," says Tyra Newell, executive director of the New Orleans branch of New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit organization that trains future school leaders. Newell, who grew up in New Orleans' Eighth Ward and attended Ursuline Academy, had put New Orleans in her rearview mirror after earning a business degree at Stanford and working in the corporate division of Kraft Foods. "There really was just no reason for me to come back," she says. That changed when she served in a residency program that embeds business professionals in a public school system. After working in Chicago public schools for several years, she jumped at the opportunity to lead New Leaders' new branch in New Orleans.

Alford had a similar experience.

"You could just be a banker at Goldman Sachs and get somebody a nice yacht, or maybe you'll get yourself a nice yacht, but in terms of making a difference, this is an opportunity," he says. "A lot of my friends, they [still] don't really know what they want to do. They know that they want their parents to be happy about what they're doing and their friends to be happy about what they're doing, and so they just kind of fall into it."

So, instead of talking with engineers about how to turn around failed parts suppliers for automakers, Alford finds himself talking about turning around the kids in New Orleans. "The kids here, you can just tell by the looks on their faces, the fifth and sixth graders here are almost adults because they've been doing things on their own for so long. And you can just tell that even when an adult speaks to them, they're adult-deprived."

Alford and others, like Ben Kleban, founder of New Orleans College Prep, a charter school that plans

to open in the fall, find traction in the independence of charter schools. It's what brought many of them to New Orleans in the first place. "On my first day of teaching in a Philadelphia public school," says Kleban, "I asked my department chair what goals were expected of me as a teacher. He laughed and said if I get anywhere, that will be progress." Kleban, 27, had worked in corporate finance for Boeing before coming to public education.

"Anybody who is a high achiever, regardless of what their background is, wants to feel empowered to be able to achieve," says Sarah Usdin, the former regional executive director of Teach for America and current founder of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO). Usdin has been influential in recruiting young talent for New Orleans' new and recovering public schools, borrowing from her Teach for America days of recruiting teachers to attract a slightly older crop of young folks into various leadership positions. She believes that charter schools have allowed these young leaders to make an immediate impact, in contrast to a traditional school district, with its systemic woes and entrenched bureaucracy.

A fundamental tenet driving charter schools and this new class of young educators is the conviction that children learn in many different ways -- and that schools should accommodate those differences. That commitment represents a paradigm shift in public education. The traditional "industrial model" that defined public schools in the past was based on the belief that all children learn the same way; therefore, instructional uniformity through large school districts and mandated curricula were believed to be the best ways to teach. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has emerged as the nation's leading model for decentralizing America's urban public schools.

"We did that because we used to think that kids were all alike and that they were widgets," says Matt Candler, a Usdin recruit who is now the chief executive of her NSNO organization. "The industrial model drove the models that we have in most of our schools. Instead, you turn it on its head and say, 'Alright, what kids do we have and how do we need to serve them?'"

Candler, 37, has been part of the charter movement from its early days. While serving as vice president for school development at KIPP from 2001 to 2004, he helped build the charter school powerhouse from two flagship campuses in Houston and New York to 37 nationwide. Today

KIPP has 52 charter schools. Candler came to work for NSNO, an organization designed to provide specialized support to individual schools in the new landscape, for the same reason many of his peers came.

"I just got really drawn into the idea of rebuilding a city," he says. "This was clearly a unique confluence of new law and desperate need for new schools. As many of our schools that can be run in a model that looks like or is a charter, that's a really powerful concept."

If charters are going to flourish, Candler is convinced it will be because of the efficacy of the business-based ideas that reformers embrace: teacher and student accountability based on the data of test scores, and the hard work and individuality of each educator.

Candler adds that those same ideas initially guided all schools in the Recovery School District (RSD), the state-run system of formerly failing New Orleans public schools -- but that first-year circumstances made the RSD's 22 non-chartered schools look too much like the old district.

"It was set up essentially the way it was because we couldn't get enough charter schools set up independently," he says. "The spirit of it was, we have to run schools systemically as a group until we build up enough capacity so that each school is an independently operated school. So I actually think that if we're going to be successful, we do need to change the way RSD is managed."

Usdin notes that, compared to the old Orleans Parish Public School District, which operated 128 schools, the Recovery district is greatly decentralized with only 22 nonchartered schools.

The vision of decentralized New Orleans public schools has made the city a contentious battleground for education reform. While charter schools in other urban districts have existed as an alternative to the industrial model, they now serve a majority of kids in New Orleans' public schools. Educators are divided on the question of whether tilting toward charter schools as the model -- as opposed to an alternative movement -- merely recognizes the reform notion that kids learn differently or goes too far in stripping away what

many believe are clear benefits from the old system.

"Every child learns differently, but in terms of motivation," says Lance Hill, executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University. Hill says the charter movement in New Orleans has gone too far. "Charter schools were originally designed to be incubators of innovation that could be shared and duplicated in traditional public schools. By creating a system of schools that are all independently run,

competing against each other, you eliminate schools' desire to share their methods with one another," says Hill. "I would hardly call kids eating frozen bologna sandwiches sitting on the floor in the RSD 'quality' reform."

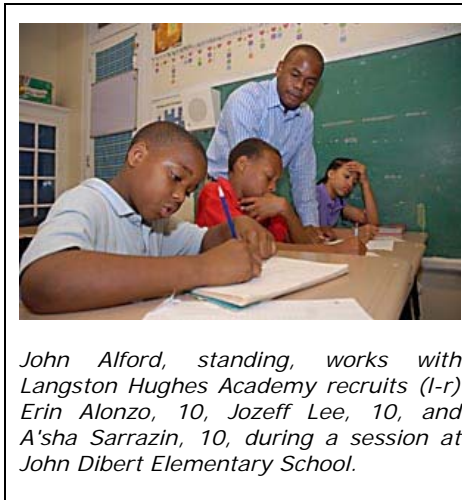
Hill adds that some charter schools have discipline policies and high levels of philanthropic support that traditional schools could never duplicate.

Reform advocates counter that being able to assess the problems and benefits of each school

individually, and not as a result of a uniform system, gets the best results regardless of whether a school is chartered or not. "Schools that I think work, regardless of governance structure, are schools where the educators in the building with the kids have the resources and autonomy to make decisions that best fit those kids' needs," says Candler.

Reformers admit, however, that striking a balance between charters' individualization and the old central system may be best for New Orleans. "We should put decision making wherever it needs to be," says Candler. "So if busing is better served by doing it at scale because it's efficient, and if we can build a system that serves all of the schools in the system, then that's something that the RSD or something more centralized than an individual school can do. I think it's the evolution of that type of thinking that might build the future vision of what the RSD, the parish, or the state might do." Other efforts to find a balance, such as a uniform registration period for schools and making it easier for parents to navigate the system, will likely fall to new RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas and state Superintendent Paul Pastorek.

In addition to having to defend their ideas in educational circles, the young educators and their reform allies face cultural clashes in the



John Alford, standing, works with Langston Hughes Academy recruits (l-r) Erin Alonzo, 10, Jozeff Lee, 10, and A'sha Sarrazin, 10, during a session at John Dibert Elementary School.

communities they serve. They often are perceived as outsiders.

"I welcome people to come help," says Jim Randels, a 20-year veteran New Orleans public school teacher who now teaches at Frederick Douglass High School. "But I've been white too long to not know that you can muck around and screw a lot of things up with your privilege and opportunity and access. I think we have hordes of people coming in as naive as you would be in your twenties. I don't necessarily blame them, but they are stepping into something that, if they are not aware of the whole arc of it, you can pretty easily be doing the devil's work."

If the charter movement has trampled anyone, it would be Randels. In addition to saying that things have gotten worse at his RSD-operated Douglass High, he also is a member of the teacher's union, whose contract was thrown out during the same reform that made it possible for folks like Alford and Candler to come down.

Despite having some returning New Orleanians and persons of color in their ranks, the young reformers' biggest challenge has been trying to be bold in their efforts without coming across as irreverent to the people they're trying to help. "It seems that people want to be able to chart your trajectory, where you came from and where you live," says Alford. He adds that although he constantly encounters some skepticism, the response to him and the opening of his school has been overwhelmingly positive. He also likes to point out that he had actually come to New Orleans before Katrina.

As for the dynamics of a majority-white reform movement engaging a mostly black school community, Candler says it's something he tries to be aware of constantly. "This is work that I'm doing, but if I fail at it, I can always go home -- culturally go home -- to the family and the culture that I grew up in," he says of his upbringing in white upper-class Atlanta. "But the friends that I work with in this business who actually grew up in the communities that we're trying to rebuild, it's higher stakes and more emotional and difficult for them because they're doing it on their home turf. They don't get to go home."

Finding balance in community relations and education reform is something that seems to exist in the microcosm that is the Algiers Charter Schools Association (ACSA) on the West Bank. Chief Technology Officer Rich Valerga, 30, another young, nontraditional educator, has been at the association's center of innovation by tailoring

plans for each of its nine schools. A former explosives expert in the Marines and a one-time construction consultant, Valerga says he and the people in New Orleans took some time getting used to each other. "It was frustrating because I come from an environment where it has to get done or it's going to cost us millions of dollars. I've had to learn to step back and say, 'Good morning,' and spent that quality time to get them to trust me and welcome me into the school."

Valerga came to New Orleans during ACSA's founding stages with his wife, who at the time was eight and a half months pregnant. He envisions integrating technology into all ACSA classes, whether the subject is English or art, instead of having just one computer class. "Walking in these schools when I first started, some people didn't know how to turn on computers. Some people, I would say, didn't know what a computer was. Getting them to dream has been a challenge," says Valerga of the teachers and students.

At some schools, Valerga installed "smart boards" that attempt to replace the traditional chalkboard with an interactive screen. Students can engage their teachers on the board from their seats, either collectively or individually. Like all technology, Valerga says, the smart board is just another tool -- nothing more, nothing less.

ACSA also plans to offer an alternative type of education at the Algiers Technology Academy, a new high school set to open in the fall. While modeled like a regular school that happens to have a focus on technology, the new school will allow students to choose one of three tracks: business office, where students get a Microsoft Office user specialist certification; Web development and Web design; and computer science. ACSA supporters say the new school will represent a marriage of innovation, community engagement and responsive individual schools that the larger system hopes to duplicate.

One thing both sides of the charter debate agree on is that the stakes are high.

While opponents of the RSD and charter schools continue to critique the movement as it progresses, it doesn't appear to be slowing down. Plans are under way to open eight additional charter schools and as many as a dozen more RSD schools in the fall. Reformers also anticipate more young people coming down to work in the new schools -- and some large revenue streams to foster individual schools' growth.

Meanwhile, the young leaders on the front lines of the reform movement are banking on results from the schools' test scores and their efforts to win over the community. For now, they say it's okay if people are skeptical.

"It's just irresponsible to say to communities, 'I promise. I promise this will be better.' It's just not fair -- and it's completely ignorant of the history of school reform in this country for the last 50 years," says Candler. "Because that's what everybody's always said to people in underserved communities. In some ways, you have to walk the walk for a long period of time to legitimately change someone's attitude, and you have to acknowledge that that's the right way for someone to approach it: to be skeptical."