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A Teachable Moment

By PAUL TOUGH

When Tony Petite enrolled in elementary school in Denver in the fall of 2005, he quickly discovered that he was the only kid in fourth grade who didn't know how to write in cursive. In the four years he spent in the New Orleans public school system, no one ever taught him how. "In my third-grade school," he told me recently, "they just sit you in the class, and they just tell you to do this, and tell you to do that. In Denver, they help you, and they show you how to do your work."

Tony arrived in Denver along with his parents and younger brother, Troy, as part of the epic exodus of hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of public-school students, driven from their homes in New Orleans by [Hurricane Katrina](#) and scattered to every corner of the country. At first, Tony felt out of place — he and Troy were among the only black students in the school — and academically, he started off well behind most of his classmates. But he got a lot of special attention from his teacher, and when he and his family returned to New Orleans a year later and he started fifth grade in Jefferson Parish, just west of the city, he was an above-average student.

Over the next two years, though, things slipped. His grades fell from A's and B's to C's, D's and F's, and last semester, he was suspended five times, mostly for fighting. When the school year ended, Tony had failed sixth grade, and his mother, Trineil Petite, went looking for a different option.

I met Tony and his mother last month, when I arrived on the doorstep of their home in Gentilly with Tiffany Hardrick and Keith Sanders, the principals of a brand-new boys-only New Orleans charter school called

Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business. Gentilly, a quiet neighborhood of mostly single-story homes, was badly flooded after Katrina. The Petites' current home, which belongs to Trineil's 83-year-old grandmother, had been filled with about five feet of water; the front of the house is still marked with a blue X and a zero, spray-painted by a rescue crew in September 2005 to show that the house had been searched and that no dead bodies had been found. (These grim reminders of the flood remain on homes all over New Orleans; down the street, a house still bore the words "DEAD DOG IN HOUSE," in six-inch-high black letters, with a giant arrow pointing to the front door.)

Petite had been searching for a school for Tony all summer, and a week earlier she heard about Miller-McCoy from the principal of a nearby charter school whose admission rolls were already full. Meanwhile, Hardrick and Sanders had been searching for Tony, or at least for boys like him; they had been in New Orleans recruiting students for almost a year at that point, running radio ads, knocking on doors, posting signs on the grassy strips that run down the middle of the city's boulevards. Miller-McCoy would be a combination middle and high school, and Hardrick and Sanders needed 108 sixth-grade students and 108 ninth-grade students, all willing to take a chance on a school with no track record. When Petite called, they had almost reached their goal; Tony got one of the last spots in sixth grade.

Before they moved last year to New Orleans, Hardrick, who is 32, and Sanders, who is 36, were public-school principals in Memphis, graduates of a prestigious program run by New Leaders for New Schools, a nonprofit that trains aspiring principals to work in urban school districts with low test scores and high concentrations of poor and minority students. It was hard to leave Memphis, they told me — their

schools were thriving, and test scores were rising — but they couldn't resist the pull of New Orleans.

It was partly a desire to help right what they felt was a great wrong, a sense almost of moral obligation. After Katrina hit, Sanders told me, he spent the week glued to his television, watching one horrifying image after another. "I remember sitting in my living room and just crying, just really feeling for the people who were involved," he said. "Now we've been given the opportunity to be a part of the rebirth of New Orleans. How often do you get a chance to contribute to something like this?"

But it wasn't only sympathy for the survivors of Katrina that drew them to New Orleans. The city's disastrously low-performing school system was almost entirely washed away in the flood — many of the buildings were destroyed, the school board was taken over and all the teachers were fired. What is being built in its place is an educational landscape unlike any other, a radical experiment in reform. More than half of the city's public-school students are now being educated in charter schools, publicly financed but privately run, and most of the rest are enrolled in schools run by an unusually decentralized and rapidly changing school district. From across the country, and in increasing numbers, hundreds of ambitious, idealistic young educators like Hardrick and Sanders have descended on New Orleans, determined to take advantage of the opportunity not just to innovate and reinvent but also to prove to the rest of the country that an entire city of children in the demographic generally considered the hardest to educate — poor African-American kids — can achieve high levels of academic success.

Katrina struck at a critical moment in the evolution of the contemporary education-reform movement. President Bush's education initiative, [No Child Left Behind](#), had shined a light on the underperformance of poor

minority students across the country by requiring, for the first time, that a school successfully educate not just its best students but its poor and minority students too in order to be counted as successful. Scattered across the country were a growing number of schools, often intensive charter schools, that seemed to be succeeding with disadvantaged students in a consistent and measurable way. But these schools were isolated examples. No one had figured out how to “scale up” those successes to transform an entire urban school district. There were ambitious new superintendents in Philadelphia, New York City, Denver and Chicago, all determined to reform their school systems to better serve poor children, but even those who seemed to be succeeding were doing so in incremental ways, lifting the percentage of students passing statewide or citywide tests to, say, 40 from 30 or to 50 from 40.

In New Orleans, before the storm, the schools weren’t succeeding even in an incremental way. In 2005, Louisiana’s public schools ranked anywhere from 43rd to 46th in the federal government’s various state-by-state rankings of student achievement, and the schools in Orleans Parish, which encompasses the city of New Orleans, ranked 67th out of the 68 parishes in the state. The school system was monochromatically black — white students made up just 3 percent of the public-school population, most of them attending one of a handful of selective-enrollment magnet schools — and overwhelmingly poor as well; more than 75 percent of students had family incomes low enough to make them eligible for a subsidized lunch from the federal government. The dysfunction in the city’s school system extended well beyond the classroom: a revolving door for superintendents, whose average tenure lasted no more than a year; school officials indicted for bribery and theft; unexplained budget deficits; decaying buildings; almost three-quarters of the city’s schools slapped with an “academically unacceptable” rating from the state.

Tony's mother, Trineil, who is 31, was a product of that system. Before the storm blew her family to Denver, she had never been outside of Louisiana, even for a day, and everyone she knew had been educated in New Orleans public schools. She was familiar with schools that didn't work and educators who didn't seem to care much. So it felt more than a little strange to her to be standing in her home with Hardrick and Sanders, two highly educated, impeccably dressed black professionals, listening to them describe what Miller-McCoy had to offer her son.

"Ultimately, it's my responsibility to make sure that you get to college," Hardrick said to Tony. "You're a sixth grader, and I'm standing in your living room telling Mom that if she will allow you to stick with me until 12th grade, you will be accepted to a four-year university."

School wouldn't be easy, she told him. He'd have to arrive each morning at 7:30 a.m., he'd have to wear a blazer and a necktie every day, he'd have to do his homework every night or stay until 6 p.m. the next afternoon to complete it. Hardrick handed Tony a copy of the Miller-McCoy Family and School Covenant, which she wanted him and his mother to sign, along with his homeroom teacher and Hardrick herself. All four people, she explained, had to make a commitment to get Tony to college.

"If you work hard and I work hard, we'll get you there," she said. "Is that fair? Are you ready to sign and shake and be officially welcomed to Miller-McCoy?"

Tony looked a little nervous, especially about the 7:30 part, but he nodded his head and said yes. Hardrick handed Tony a pen, and while he signed his name, she asked his mother if she had any questions.

“I’m excited,” Petite said. “This is different. Y’all are taking time with these kids.”

What first sold her on Miller-McCoy, she said, was when the woman who answered the phone at the school told her that the boys would wear matching blazers with the school crest. “I said, ‘Blazers?’ I’ve never seen any kids running around in blazers except at St. Augustine” — a nearby Catholic high school — “and that’s where you pay to go to school. This is a public school, and they wear blazers and ties? I want that for my son. I do. I really want it for him. I know he can do it.”

When we left, the sun was going down. It was sweltering, like every midsummer day in New Orleans, the kind of day when the only thing you want to do is sit next to an air-conditioner and drink iced tea. But all around the city, things were buzzing. Six other charter-school leaders were preparing to open their doors for the first time, training staff and arranging bus schedules. In an office park down by the Mississippi River, another crop of future principals were meeting to begin planning their own new schools, which they hoped to open in the fall of 2009. Two hundred and fifty [Teach for America](#) teachers, nearly all recent college graduates, had just arrived to complete preparations for their new positions in schools in the region. And in a converted office building across town, next to a highway interchange, 80 returning principals and other school administrators were spending the week being trained in new techniques of “instructional coaching” and behavioral interventions.

For many years now, the central debate in American education has been over just how much schools can do to improve the low rate of achievement among poor children. While it is true that for decades the children of New Orleans toiled in a substandard school system, they

have also continually faced countless other obstacles to success — inadequate health care, poorly educated parents, exposure to high rates of violent crime and a popular culture that often denigrates mainstream achievement. And though the hurricane washed away the school system, it didn't wash away their other problems. In fact, for most children it compounded them with a whole new set of troubles: wrecked homes, frequent relocations, divided families, post-traumatic stress. Were public schools really the right vehicle to attack all of those problems? Were a blazer and a necktie and a lot of hard work enough to get Tony Petite to college?

For Hardrick and Sanders and the dozens of other education reformers I spoke to in New Orleans since my first trip there in March, the answer was a firm yes. They didn't deny the daunting spectrum of problems facing the children they were trying to educate. But they said they believed they could overcome them in the classroom — and that the new educational terrain in New Orleans had significantly increased their chances of success.

Before Hardrick and Sanders got in their car to drive off down the potholed streets of Gentilly, I asked Hardrick what had motivated her to abandon a successful school and a comfortable life in Memphis to come to New Orleans and start all over from scratch. She thought for a moment before answering. "I think that when we get it right, we will transform education for the nation, for urban schools everywhere," she said. "We have an opportunity here to create a model that works, so we can say to other schools, other districts and other cities and states: This is what we should be doing. *This* is how we give all students a quality education."

Of course, there's also the possibility that the model they are building *won't* work — and it is that thought that keeps Hardrick and many of the other new arrivals up at night. What if they don't achieve the level of success they are hoping for? What kind of lessons will people draw from the city's grand educational experiment then?

For the first couple of years after the storm, the schools of New Orleans, like most things in the city, were a mess. Students returned to the city more quickly than state officials expected (in some cases, parents living in Houston or Baton Rouge sent their children back alone, to stay with relatives or simply to fend for themselves), and by September 2006, there were about 22,000 public-school students in New Orleans, one-third of the pre-Katrina population. Though it was more than a year after the storm, the school system wasn't ready for them: there were not enough buses, not enough textbooks; no hot lunches, no doors on the bathroom stalls. There also weren't enough teachers — 106 positions were still unfilled on the first day of classes; at some schools, there were as many private security guards, often young and poorly trained, as there were teachers.

Things began to change that spring. In February, Cecil Picard, the state education superintendent, died after a long battle with A.L.S., or Lou Gehrig's disease, and Gov. [Kathleen Blanco](#) offered his job to Paul Pastorek, a former president of the state school board who had been running an educational advisory committee since the storm. Although Pastorek was not an educator, he was well acquainted with many of the leading figures in the education-reform world, and before he accepted Blanco's offer, he spent a few days calling around the country, rounding up support, asking one person after another the same question: If I take the job, will you come help?

One call was to Paul Vallas, the head of the Philadelphia school system, who was locked in an increasingly bitter feud with the city's school reform commission over a \$73 million deficit in the budget that appeared unexpectedly the previous October. After six years running the Chicago schools and five years doing the same in Philadelphia, Vallas was known nationally as a reformer. Pastorek asked Vallas if he'd be interested in leaving Philadelphia and running the Recovery School District, the state-mandated entity that controlled many of the public schools in New Orleans.

Ever since, Pastorek and Vallas have been the odd couple at the top of the New Orleans school system. Pastorek, compact and neatly dressed, speaks softly and slowly, carefully weighing his words. Vallas, tall and rangy, is a manic talker; sentences take off in one direction and then veer wildly toward another. Pastorek sits still, his hands folded in front of him. Vallas is a compulsive fidgeter, sometimes hoisting his entire body up onto his office chair so that he is perched on the seat in a full crouch.

Vallas is the detail man; Pastorek is the deep thinker. Since taking the job, Pastorek has immersed himself in theories of education, consulting with scholars from Seattle to Toronto to London. His conclusion, more than a year into his work, is that fixing a public-school system is not at its root a question of curriculum or personnel or even money. It is a question of governance. It is simply impossible, Pastorek has come to believe, for a traditional school system, run from the top down by a central administrator, to educate large numbers of poor children to high levels of achievement. "The command-and-control structure can produce marginal improvements," he told me when we met last month at a coffeehouse on Magazine Street. "But what's clear to me is that it can only get you so far. If you create a system where initiative and

creativity is valued and rewarded, then you'll get change from the bottom up. If you create a system where people are told what to do and how to do it, then you will get change from the top down. We've been doing top-down for many years in Louisiana. And all we have is islands of excellence amidst a sea of mediocrity and failure."

The theorist who has had the most influence over Pastorek is Paul T. Hill, who runs a research group at the [University of Washington](#) called the Center on Reinventing Public Education. In September 2005, while much of New Orleans was still submerged, Hill published an article in Education Week that urged state and federal officials and philanthropic foundations to resist the temptation simply to send emergency aid to whatever programs seemed most in need. "The circumstances call for a coherent strategy, not just a round of do-gooding," he wrote. "Don't spend money rebuilding the old district structure."

In 2000, in a book titled "It Takes a City," Hill and two other researchers laid out a new architecture for urban school reform that they called the Diverse Providers Strategy. Under this model, local school boards wouldn't run a school system hierarchically, the way they usually did; instead, they would oversee a "portfolio" of schools, some run directly by the board and many run on contract by nonprofits, universities or private companies. Schools would receive money on a per-student basis, and principals could then use that money to staff their schools as they liked and pay for whatever instructional methods they chose. Each school would negotiate salaries and work rules directly with its teachers. The system's small central office would be responsible only for oversight, though it would have considerable power to hold principals accountable: schools that didn't produce results would be closed, and successful schools would be imitated and replicated.

It is this model that Pastorek and Vallas have adapted for New Orleans. Pastorek says that he wants the state's role to be that of a "harvester of high-quality schools" in the city — nurturing promising ones and weeding out failing ones. "If schools run into trouble, you support them," Pastorek said. "But if they're still failing after you support them, then you pull the plug and bring in a new provider or an experienced provider. Over a period of 5 or 6 years, 10 at the most, we'll have nothing but high-quality operators in our city."

For now, though, the system on the ground in New Orleans is a bewildering tangle of interlocking organizational structures administering 86 public schools, only a minority of them directly controlled by Vallas. The law that expanded the Recovery School District, or R.S.D., allowed it to take over any "failing" school in the city, which meant virtually every school in the city except for the selective-admission magnets. Those magnets stayed as part of the rump version of the Orleans Parish School Board, an elected group that before the flood controlled the whole system and now controls just five schools and oversees 12 independently run charters. Two charter schools that existed before Katrina are overseen by the state school board. There are 33 charters under the supervision of the Recovery School District. And finally there are the 34 schools run directly by the R.S.D.

Looked at one way, this jumble is a classic let-a-hundred-flowers-bloom portfolio system. But in practice, the system is inherently unequal, with each network administered by different rules. Most of the Orleans Parish schools and charters admit students on the basis of test scores and writing samples with, in some cases, preference given to residents of the well-off neighborhood surrounding the school. As a result, they include the only public schools in the city with any significant population of middle-class white students. (Those are also the best-

performing schools, by a considerable margin.) Recovery School District charters are “open enrollment,” meaning they are required to accept students from anywhere in the city, regardless of academic performance. But the charters can apply some degree of selectivity too, by making the kind of demands that Miller-McCoy’s principals plan to make on Tony Petite; weaker students and students with less academically focused parents sometimes can’t stand the pressure and drop out. The schools run directly by the Recovery district, as a result, are the schools of last resort, the schools required to admit every student: the kids who can’t get into selective schools, the ones who get kicked out of charter schools, the ones who arrive in New Orleans in the middle of the school year, the ones whose parents couldn’t get it together to find them anything better.

Many parents and other observers have charged that the city’s current structure has recreated and, in fact, codified the unfairness of the prestorm system, which was generally perceived to operate on two separate tiers of achievement and opportunity. According to a 2007 report commissioned by a coalition of civic groups, “Community members believe that in the current system, a select group of students has the opportunity to attend high-quality public schools, while the vast majority of students — for the most part poor and minority students — are stuck in low-performing schools in which they have little opportunity for growth and development.” In the Orleans Parish charters, 19 percent of students are deemed “talented and gifted,” compared with 1 percent of students in Recovery School District-run schools and charters.

It is one of the oddities of the organizational structure that governs public-school education in New Orleans today that Pastorek and Vallas, the high-paid hotshots at the top, are responsible for the schools with the biggest problems and the worst test scores, while the schools that are

doing best are the ones furthest from their control, the ones they can claim the least credit for. What the two men will tell you, though, is that this is exactly the way things should be. Under a portfolio model, successful schools can be left alone to do their own thing, while failing schools are subject to increasingly active levels of, first, support and then control.

Pastorek and Vallas are employing two parallel strategies for the Recovery School District. First, they're instituting a series of ambitious reforms in the district-run schools. They have expanded the school day by an hour and a half and are trying to extend the school year from 173 days to 193 days. This year teachers (who are working without a collective bargaining agreement) were each given a \$3,000 raise. And in every school, principals and teachers are being trained in the "best practices" of the country's leading charter schools. One of Vallas's first acts as superintendent was to offer a prominent position to Gary Robichaux, a Louisiana native who, two weeks before Katrina, opened the first charter in New Orleans associated with the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools, the best-known and arguably the most successful network of charter schools in the country.

Last summer, Vallas persuaded Robichaux to leave his new KIPP school in the French Quarter to oversee the Recovery School District's elementary and middle schools, and Robichaux is frank now about his intentions for his new job: he wants to apply as much of the KIPP model to the Recovery schools as he can. He has brought dozens of principals to visit the school he used to run, to observe the KIPP model up close, and this summer he conducted mandatory leadership training for the top administrators in each school.

Although Vallas is a believer, in theory, in decentralization, he and Robichaux are providing a great deal of centralized support for the schools in the Recovery School District. They have created a “managed curriculum” for every school in the district to follow: detailed binders that each teacher can consult to see which skills and what knowledge they should be imparting each week and month in order to keep up with the state’s standards. The R.S.D. requires its schools to administer regular “benchmarking” assessments to each child in the district in each core subject, to monitor how much is being learned — and taught — in each classroom.

But at the same time that Pastorek and Vallas and Robichaux are trying to improve the R.S.D.’s direct-run schools, they are also helping to create a competitive framework citywide that will most likely drive many of those schools out of existence. Part of the competition comes from a new voucher program, pushed through by Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#), that will pay for nearly 900 New Orleans elementary-school students to attend private and parochial schools this year. But the more significant lever of change is charters — schools that get public money and are overseen by a government entity but are managed by an independent board. Pastorek, Vallas and Robichaux all say they expect charters to expand their presence in the district, to a point where 75 percent or even 90 percent of the city’s schools are charters.

Their evolving plan would involve both the highest- and the lowest-performing schools in the Recovery School District becoming charters, though in different ways. Principals at high-performing Recovery district schools will be encouraged to apply for a charter that would let them run their schools independently — essentially, to “graduate” out of the control of the district. On the other end of the performance scale, schools that consistently fall short of state standards, even after all of

the training and support that Vallas can muster, will be seized by the R.S.D., which will either hand the school over to a new or existing charter-school provider or shut it down and replace it with a new charter school. Failing charter schools will also be taken over or closed down, by having their charters revoked or transferred to another charter provider.

“Over the long haul,” Pastorek explained, “the R.S.D. becomes an instrument that evaluates existing schools, supports existing schools, recommends the closure of schools and recommends the best operator to come in and take over, or the best operator to come in in place of that school. We put people in business, and we take people out of business.”

One obvious potential problem with this vision of an almost entirely chartered district is that charter schools are not magic; on average, nationwide, charters don’t do significantly better than traditional public schools. In New Orleans, however, there are some sound practical reasons for Pastorek and his team to feel confident about the prospects of a large-scale chartering program. A powerful alliance of nonprofits has emerged in the city, supported by money from the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and other philanthropies, to recruit and train new charter operators and to help provide them the support and the personnel they need to set up and run consistently high-quality charter schools.

At the center of this alliance is a well-financed organization called New Schools for New Orleans, run by a former KIPP executive and a former Teach for America administrator. This is the group that “incubated” Miller-McCoy Academy for a year, recruiting Hardrick and Sanders from Memphis and providing them with office space, money and expertise during their year of preparation, as well as continuing support as the academy grows. This month, five schools incubated at New

Schools for New Orleans will open their doors, including Miller-McCoy; next year there will most likely be four more. The New Orleans office of New Leaders for New Schools, meanwhile, will be training a new group of principals each year; five of the six members of this year’s “class” are going into positions leading charters. Teach for America’s regional operation in Greater New Orleans is growing quickly; its incoming class is the second-largest one in the country after New York City’s. Each year, the group plans to send 50 or more teachers into charters in the Recovery district, where they will serve as a well-educated and highly motivated, if inexperienced, labor force for the start-ups. (At the same time, Teach for America is sending 75 teachers this year into direct-run Recovery schools, where it perceives a greater need.) Finally, a group called teachNOLA recruited about 100 new teachers this year, mostly career-changing professionals, and three-quarters of them will work in charters.

Pastorek acknowledges that for superintendents across the country, shutting down failing schools has proved to be an exceptionally difficult undertaking. Aside from politically damaging visuals — it’s never good to have adorable children marching on your office, carrying signs saying, “Please Save Our School” — it’s hard to shut down even the worst school if you don’t have something effective to replace it with. But Pastorek says he is determined not to flinch when it comes time to “take people out of business.” And the combined force of those four nonprofit human-capital pipelines will make it much easier, in coming years, for him to pull the trigger. Each year, he’ll have a handful of new schools ready to open, each one led by a Gates-financed, fully incubated, KIPP-marinated principal like Sanders or Hardrick — the kind of academic superheroes who before the storm just didn’t come to work in New Orleans in big numbers. Inevitably, he’ll make space for them. And before long, that annual handful will add up. In a city like New York,

with its 1,400 public schools, new-school innovations can seem like pebbles tossed into the ocean. But in a city with fewer than 100 schools, 5 or 6 new schools a year will have a big impact. Right now there are probably 100 great charter schools scattered across the country; in a few years, Pastorek and his allies are asking, why can't there be 100 great charter schools in New Orleans?

Pastorek's optimism and determination can be inspiring, but he admits that for now, at least, there's no proof that a portfolio model will do a significantly better job educating poor children than a command-and-control model. When I spoke last month to [Diane Ravitch](#), a historian of education who has spent decades studying and writing about the often dispiriting process of school reform, she said that she was skeptical that a change in the governance model would solve the problems plaguing New Orleans's schools. "The fundamental issue in American education — I say this after 40 years of having read and studied and written about the problems — is one that is demographic," she told me. Poor children, Ravitch said, simply face too many problems outside the classroom. "If you don't buttress whatever happens in school with social and economic changes that give kids a better chance in life and put their families on a more stable footing, then schools alone are not going to solve the problems of poor student performance. There has to be a range of social and economic strategies to support and enhance whatever happens in school."

Last spring, I paid several visits to a ninth-grade English class on the second floor of Rabouin High, a Recovery School District-run school in downtown New Orleans, just a few blocks from the Superdome. The class was taught by Chelsea Schmitz, a 23-year-old Teach for America corps member who was in her first year as a teacher. Demographically, Schmitz was quite a bit different than her students — white, blond and

Midwestern — but she seemed to have built a rapport with them, in part by encouraging them to write about their lives. The students all arrived in her classroom performing well below the mean; at the beginning of the school year, Schmitz gave her ninth-grade students a set of reading-comprehension tests, and only one was able to read above a sixth-grade level, with many scoring significantly below that. But their autobiographical poems were eloquent and powerful.

What was most striking to me, though, reading the poems and listening to the students read them aloud, was the depth of the social dysfunction they described. I expected grisly stories about Katrina and its aftermath, but most of the students wrote about the problems that existed in New Orleans both before and after the storm: friends killed, cousins shot dead, cocaine deals, abusive mothers, fathers in prison. I was impressed with Schmitz's ability to connect with and motivate her students, some of whom were only a few years younger than she was. But the task in front of her, to turn around the lives of these wounded and poorly educated adolescents, seemed daunting — to me, if not to her.

The long-running national debate over the potential impact of a teacher like Schmitz on the lives of children like the ones she faced at Rabouin resurfaced in June, when on consecutive days, two new advocacy organizations announced their formation, each calling for a very different solution to the problem of underachievement in school by poor minorities. One group called itself the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education; Ravitch was a signatory to that one, and the group's declaration echoed her belief that schools alone were no match for the problems of inner-city youth. The second group, led by [Joel I. Klein](#), the New York City schools chancellor, and the Rev. [Al Sharpton](#), was called the Education Equality Project; its declaration blamed not social woes but a broken education system for the failure of so many of the nation's

schoolchildren. In the weeks after the announcements, Pastorek and Vallas both added their names to that declaration, and when I met with Pastorek, I asked him about it. What about the other group's argument? Was it really possible to solve the problems of New Orleans's children in the classroom without involving other social services and supports?

"It would be convenient to say that it's a whole lot of other people who need to be part of the equation," he replied. "But we have the job. And we have to do something." Pastorek said he didn't want to fall back on the excuse that he had heard from many other school officials, in Louisiana and elsewhere — that it was impossible to fix their schools until other social problems had first been corrected.

But then he switched direction somewhat. In many ways, he said, he was sympathetic to the Ravitch position. "If we want to really get kids to the level that we want to get them," he said, "and we want to do it in a more efficient and effective way, then we would be well served if we took care of those kinds of problems — if we provided more resources to kids from conception to early childhood, if we took care of mental-health issues and physical ailments and teeth and eye examinations. Including, you know, where these kids go home to sleep at night. I've lived in this community a long time, and I can't imagine how I could ever feel comfortable in neighborhoods that these kids live in at night. And yet they do, and we still expect them to do well."

Pastorek paused for a moment. "So, now, can I solve all those problems tomorrow afternoon? Can I even get the attention of the people who have control over those things? Right now, in New Orleans, after Katrina, the answer is no, I can't. But I can't take the position that I can't succeed unless I have those things. I have to take the position that we're going to do it in spite of that. Now, will it be hard? Will I be less

successful? Probably yes. But I have to take that approach, because I don't have really any other cards to play.”

Ideally, Pastorek told me, he would like to go back to the governor and the Legislature and ask for financing for a more comprehensive approach to the needs of his schoolchildren, but first, he needs to deliver some results with the money he has. “If you want to get these schools from awful to good, you don't really need to put out much money,” he said. “But if you want to get them from good to great, you have to start spending some money. And that's where I think we are in the Recovery School District. We've got to get our schools from awful to good, and we've got to get there on the money that we've got, knowing damn good and well that it ain't enough. But if I can get them from awful to good, then I can command more money so I can get them from good to great. And I can command other resources and other partnerships with these other people who need to be at the table.”

For now, it falls to teachers like Schmitz to do what they can with what they have. At Rabouin, there were metal detectors at the front door and frequent fights in the hallways. The high-tech whiteboard projector, which Vallas had installed in every Recovery district middle- and high-school classroom, was out of order in Schmitz's room when I visited, and its wires hung down from the ceiling. But Schmitz had set high goals for her classes — she wanted each of her students to move up at least two grade levels in reading scores during the school year — and she worked hard to figure out how to make those goals a reality. She started a 7:30 a.m. “breakfast club” for the students who had shown the most improvement in their schoolwork or their attitude. She invented a reward system in which she handed out raffle tickets, known as Schmitz stubs, for a variety of positive behaviors, from answering a question correctly to helping another student; each Friday, she raffled off prizes

like gift certificates to Subway or McDonald's. At the end of the poetry unit, she took her students out to the Sound Café, a coffeehouse in the Bywater District, where they listened to slam poets and performed their own poems for an audience. She wasn't able to hold on to all of her students; some moved away from New Orleans, some dropped out. But some flourished.

One Sunday afternoon in May, one of Schmitz's students, Ronnie Stewart, took me out to see the ruins of the B. W. Cooper public-housing complex, known more commonly as the Calliope projects, where he grew up. He and his family spent seven days trapped in their third-floor apartment by the flood that followed Katrina, until finally they were rescued by a Coast Guard boat. At one point, Stewart told me, when it looked as if help would never come, he and a couple of his cousins had to swim through the oily water that covered [Martin Luther King Boulevard](#) to get food and water and diapers for their family from a flooded convenience store. Now the projects are abandoned, surrounded by a tall barbed-wire fence and marked for demolition.

Stewart, who is 18, was a senior; he was taking Schmitz's class because he never passed ninth-grade English. Before Katrina, he told me, his teachers never pushed him very hard. "They always showed us the easy way to get through something," he said. "How to get around it. That's why I think so many people are struggling now, schoolwise. Before the storm, we mostly had teachers just really trying to keep us in high school. No teacher was talking to us about college. But now they are. They're mostly trying to get us out of high school and into college now."

Stewart and his classmates gave Schmitz a hard time when she first arrived. "We tried to get over on her, but she always cracked down," he said. "She was always there for us, always telling me: 'Ronnie, do your

work; Ronnie, what college are you going to? Ronnie, did you call the university?’ I was like, I finally got a teacher that really cares about me.”

The poetry unit had a big impact on Stewart. He wrote a poem called “The Life of a Kid in New Orleans,” describing the violence he had seen growing up: “For me just stepping outside the door of my house means/I am taking the risk of seeing death.” He memorized it and recited it, first for his classmates, then for a group of Schmitz’s fellow Teach for America teachers and finally at the Sound Café.

At Schmitz’s urging, Stewart applied to Southern University at New Orleans; beginning later this month, he plans to study criminal justice, a telling choice for a young man with two close friends in jail, one for rape and the other for murder. “Miss Schmitz showed me that there’s a lot more to the world than this,” he said, gesturing at the crumbling concrete hulks behind him. “If it wasn’t for Miss Schmitz, I wouldn’t be going to college now.”

Earlier this month, the state released test results for every public school in New Orleans. There were signs of improvement: 43 percent of fourth-grade students in Recovery School District charters and district-run schools scored at or above grade level on the state English test, compared with 34 percent in the previous year. But the numbers revealed the great distance New Orleans still has to go; in the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level in 8th-grade math, 12th-grade math and 12th-grade English, not a single R.S.D. charter or district-run school beat the average for Louisiana as a whole — and Louisiana is still among the lowest-performing states in the country. The gap between the system’s different structures remained, too; 89 percent of the Orleans Parish schools matched or surpassed the state average in

fourth-grade English, while just 13 percent of Recovery schools did the same.

New Orleans's newly arrived reformers have set their sights high. New Leaders for New Schools says it hopes that in five years, half of the public schools in the city will be led by principals trained in their system, and they want their principals to attain 90 percent proficiency rates and 90 percent graduation rates within five years of taking the job. Given that proficiency rates in most schools in the Recovery district are currently below 40 percent, those results would represent an educational earthquake. Pastorek's goals are similarly ambitious; he sees a day in the not-too-distant future when the city's white children will return to integrate the public-school system, along with the children of the black middle class, all drawn by safer and higher-achieving schools and the introduction of programs like specialized academies and the International Baccalaureate program.

When I spoke to Frederick Hess, an education-policy analyst at the [American Enterprise Institute](#), he cautioned against putting too much emphasis on a complete transformation of the city's school system. In the early 1990s, Hess worked as a teacher in Baton Rouge, and even then, he said, New Orleans was notorious for running an "abysmal" school district. "So if we're now in a position where 20 or 40 or 50 percent of kids in New Orleans are attending good or even competent schools," he said, "that to my mind is a significant win.

"Of course, the folks down there are the last people to plant their flag on improving things for 30 percent of the kids," he went on. "They're all world-changers. They're all straight from the Great Society. That's great, and I'm glad they've got huge ambitions, but the problem is that if they fall somewhat short of their goals, it will be very easy for critics of

charter schooling or critics of Vallas or critics of New Leaders for New Schools or Teach for America to seize on the fact that we haven't seen 100 percent of students served in the way we'd like and to then try to impugn the entire set of reforms."

To Pastorek, the greater risk is the opposite problem — that people in Louisiana will be comfortable with the modest successes that he expects over the next couple of years. "Right now, a lot of people believe that you just can't succeed with some kids," he said. He told me about a recent conversation with a "senior-ranking" state senator who served on the Legislature's education committee. "He had this idea in mind where we have to have a dual-track system, a track for the kids who are going to make it, and a track for the kids who aren't going to make it," he said. "There's an assumption that there is a group of kids who won't make it." A big part of Pastorek's job, as he sees it, is to convince Louisianans that that isn't true.

Kira Orange Jones is one of Hess's world-changers. Born in Co-op City in the Bronx, she joined Teach for America after college and was sent to Baton Rouge, where she spent the next two years teaching fourth grade. She earned a master's in education from Harvard, and then in 2006 she returned to New York and started work as the head of new-site development for Teach for America. In the spring of 2007, when she was 27, she flew to New Orleans for a two-day conference, and by the end of the second day, she had made the decision to pack up her apartment and move down to run Teach for America's operation in Greater New Orleans.

When I spoke to Orange Jones last spring, I asked her if she agreed with Hess that there was a danger in setting high expectations for what she and others might achieve in New Orleans. "Yes, there's a risk," she said,

nodding. “But there’s no real alternative. The reality is that we have a window of opportunity to innovate and to take risks that other places in the country don’t have. But if within a matter of years we aren’t able to produce the results, that window will close. So we need to maximize this moment to do the work that should have been done a long time ago.”

When I asked Paul Vallas what made New Orleans such a promising place for educational reform, he told me that it was because he had no “institutional obstacles” — no school board, no collective bargaining agreement, a teachers’ union with very little power. “No one tells me how long my school day should be or my school year should be,” he said. “Nobody tells me who to hire or who not to hire. I can hire the most talented people. I can promote people based on merit and based on performance. I can dismiss people if they’re chronically nonattending or if they’re simply not performing.”

To Orange Jones, though, questions about the shape of the city’s education bureaucracy — charter versus noncharter, union versus nonunion, centralized or decentralized — were all somewhat beside the point. What really mattered, she said, was the work that was going on in individual classrooms, between teachers and the students who needed their help.

In a few weeks, 250 new college graduates would arrive to begin their assignments teaching in and around New Orleans, and it was Orange Jones’s job to make sure they had everything they needed to connect with their students. During the selection process, she said, she interviewed dozens of them, and those conversations made her feel optimistic. “When I hear the stories of why they’re joining us in New Orleans, it is really powerful,” she said. “They just deeply believe that what we’re taking on in the education realm is feasible.”

Of course, Orange Jones added, that didn't mean that the job ahead of them would be easy. "The test scores in New Orleans may have been higher this year than they have been in 10 years," she said. "But the reality is that they're not nearly as high as they need to be."

We were sitting in Orange Jones's office on the sixth floor of K&B Plaza, which looks out on the hotels and office buildings of downtown New Orleans. The rapidly expanding Teach for America staff had moved in just a few days earlier, after outgrowing their previous space, and many of the offices and cubicles were still stacked with boxes. It had been almost exactly a year since Orange Jones arrived in New Orleans, and when she looked around her, all she could see was everything that still had to be done.

"We have a long way to go, frankly," she said. "I mean, that sort of goes without saying. But we have to start somewhere."

Paul Tough is an editor at the magazine and the author of "Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America," to be published next month.