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GRADE IMPROVEMENTS

Judged a disaster before Katrina, New Orleans public schools are earning high marks for progress

By Suzanne Johnson



FOUNDER: Starting a new charter high school in New Orleans is "the most exciting thing I have ever done," says Harvard-trained educator Ben Marcovitz.

Looking for symbols of the revolution in public education in post-Katrina New Orleans? Just look through your windshield at those waving fields of yard signs. They sprouted at every major intersection this spring advertising an often bewildering array of school enrollment choices – charter schools, "recovery" district" schools, parish-run schools, private schools.

Ben Marcovitz, the 28-year-old founder and incoming principal of the New Orleans Charter Science & Math Academy or "Sci-Academy," has planted about 500 yard signs.

The high school will open this fall in flood-ravaged eastern New Orleans and

Marcovitz needs to attract at least 70 students for the inaugural class of 2012.

Besides advertising, Marcovitz has been trying to reach every eighth-grader in the city in person. "I've met about 70 or 80 percent of them so far," Marcovitz says. He tells each prospect that after four years at his Sci-Academy "you'll not only be ready for college, you'll be ready to succeed in college. We will prepare to take up world-changing pursuits." He's also recruiting seven teachers through Web sites like idealist.com.

Grassroots marketing tactics like these are not much taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education where Marcovitz earned his master's degree in 2006. "The blueprint doesn't exist for what's happening in public education here," he says.

And that's what makes starting a brand-new school "the most exciting thing I've ever done," Marcovitz says. "I get the freedom to hire, evaluate and, if need be, dismiss my own staff. As a team, we get to focus on excellence above everything else. You give me freedom, I give you accountability."

Such optimistic talk about public schools was heard rarely in New Orleans before August 2005. By many key measures, the New Orleans public school system was already a disaster when Hurricane Katrina hit town.

The Orleans Parish School Board was \$265 million in debt and on the verge of bankruptcy. School board employees and contractors had racked up more than 25 indictments on bribery, fraud and theft charges following an FBI probe – the most widely publicized case that of a janitor who drew a \$70,000 annual salary. School buildings were crumbling from neglect, and the students weren't faring much better. Of 127 schools reporting to the Orleans Parish School Board, 112 were deemed academic failures and were being threatened by state takeover.

Initially, the storm made things even worse. Many of the poorly kept buildings were now in total ruins. The city's 65,000 public school students – the majority poor black students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches – were scattered around the country. The financially strapped system had to discontinue payrolls, fire every teacher, and all but a small core of administrators. Three years later, public education in New Orleans bears no

resemblance to the dysfunction of 2005. And while the public school system is not yet the national model for reform that educators expect it to become, but it is well on its way thanks to a combination of vision, determination and a willingness to throw the rulebook out the window.

Witness the results:

- There has been a proliferation of charter schools – free, publicly funded schools that operate with a great deal of autonomy in designing curricula and day-to-day operations, which allows more flexibility and creativity. New Orleans now has more charter schools than any other U.S. urban school district.

- Student achievement is on the rise as measured by LEAP scores. In May, for example, the Recovery School District reported double-digit, across-the-board gains for fourth graders in district-run schools. Math and language skills scores were up by 19 and 16 percent respectively.

- Parental and community involvement is at an all-time high, with neighborhood groups and nonprofits stepping up to contribute ideas, volunteers and money. Meanwhile, the charters have created new opportunities for board and volunteer service.

- Buildings have been renovated, and students provided with better facilities and equipment. Every public high school student now has a laptop computer programmed to help them learn.

- Highly qualified new teachers and administrators have been brought in who are injecting a new enthusiasm and spirit about public education in New Orleans.

The radical changes taking place in New Orleans public schools are a welcome relief to Tulane University president Scott Cowen, chair of who chairs Tulane's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, a think-tank and research group that works with local schools and organizations to improve K-12 education.

"We continue to make steady and significant progress in rebuilding the system of schools that emerged since the storm," Cowen says. He ranks the creation of charter schools, new leadership and community involvement as the biggest success stories so far.

Louisiana's state educators had been watching the declining public school system in Orleans Parish for several years.

After Katrina, the 112 underperforming New Orleans public schools were moved under a state-operated Recovery School District.

When high-energy attorney Paul Pastorek stepped into the role of State Superintendent of Education in March 2006, however, the public school system remained in shambles. He moved quickly to start repairing buildings and getting schools open.

The Recovery School District initially opened only charter schools. Many of the earliest RSD charters opened as part of the Algiers Charter School Association on the city's West Bank.

Like the RSD itself, the Algiers group was already in the works before Katrina. "The community had been looking for an alternative to the repetitive cycle of failing schools in Orleans Parish," explains Matthew Broussard, association communications director. With the public charters, he said, they had found something that worked. Currently, 80 public schools are operating in New Orleans – 40 of them are charters supervised by the RSD, the downsized Orleans Parish School Board, or a nonprofit charter board such as the Algiers association.

Getting schools up and running was not enough, Pastorek realized. There also had to be enough good, highly qualified teachers and, above all, a leader with vision. That's where the other "Paul" comes in.

RSD Superintendent Paul Vallas didn't literally ride into New Orleans on a white horse,



NEW CHARTER: McDonogh 15 School for the Creative Arts in the French Quarter is one of 40 new charter schools in the city.

but the comparison isn't too far-fetched. A seasoned school reformer, Vallas had forged a reputation as a visionary who had dramatically turned around troubled systems in Chicago and Philadelphia. When he agreed to take on the New Orleans schools in May 2007, it was a major coup.



REFORM-MINDED: *New Orleans Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas was recruited last year after turning around troubled school systems in Chicago and Philadelphia.*

Asked what he sees as the system's most important step to date, Pastorek doesn't miss a beat. "Hiring Paul Vallas," he says. "He is a world-class superintendent. He sees himself as being on a public service mission to help New Orleans. He has done more in one year to restore stability, educate children and create a more potent teaching workforce than many people have done in years."

As for Vallas, he found some pleasant surprises as he entered the New Orleans public school fray like, as a staff member put it, "a whirligig."

For one thing, he loves the degree to which New Orleans has gotten involved. "People have closed ranks around school reform," he says.

"People know that this is a chance in a lifetime to build a brand new school system from scratch."

Help is coming from outside New Orleans as well, Vallas says.

"We have seen a huge infusion of talent in New Orleans because of people's desire to come here and help rebuild one of the great American cities, because of the excitement in the opportunity to build a school district from the ground up, and because of the opportunity to come to a place where there are no institutional obstacles to building a school district that benefits children."

Just ask Ben Marcovitz.

Raised in Takoma Park, Md., Marcovitz took a teaching job in New Orleans in 2002 after graduating from Yale University. He left in 2004 to begin his graduate studies in education at Harvard and was visiting friends in New York on that late August weekend as Katrina approached. "We were all making jambalaya, and I realized that though I had left New Orleans, I really hadn't left it all," he remembers. Then, as the disaster unfolded on television, he said "I felt I would just drop the whole graduate school thing and move back down."

Instead he raised funds and volunteered for hurricane relief while completing his Master's. He returned to New Orleans in May 2006 and served as assistant principal at New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy. Recognizing the need for excellent open-enrollment public schools in New Orleans, Ben spent the past year training with New Schools for New Orleans, and developing a plan to create his own school.

New Schools for New Orleans founder and President Sarah Usdin also has school reform in her blood. A former teacher and Louisiana state director of Teach for America, she formed New Schools right after the storm to promote partnerships between New Orleans schools and local and national nonprofits and foundations. Working with TeachNOLA, for example, Usdin's group has brought more than 200 new teachers into the city.

"If you look across the spectrum to see what can help students close the achievement gap, it comes down to good teachers," Usdin says.

Administrators are important too—not just at Vallas' level, but in each school.

Broussard points to the work that principal Mary Laurie has done at O. Perry Walker College and Career Preparatory Charter High School. "It was an academically poor school pre-Katrina, but she has begun turning it around by creating a positive learning environment for students and building a strong academic foundation around it," Broussard says. This year, 53 percent of Walker's graduating class received advance college or certification credits. "That kind of statistic should be encouraging to everyone who cares about the future of education," he says.

In looking at the post-Katrina school success story, Pastorek also points to the willingness of private and corporate philanthropy to trust that an investment in New

Orleans public schools is money well spent. "The foundations are finally getting comfortable with our direction and are starting to step up to the plate to support us," Pastorek says.

The Entergy Charitable Foundation, for example, has awarded more than \$1 million to benefit public education in the metro area, says Patty Riddlebarger, director of corporate social responsibility.

"If Hurricane Katrina has a silver lining it is that the disaster has created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a significant difference in public education in New Orleans," Riddlebarger says. "New Orleans is benefiting from funding and resources from foundations, organizations and groups from around the country, which has created a crucible for innovation and experimentation in urban public education. By joining in these efforts, Entergy is hopeful that New Orleans can become a national model for successful turnaround of urban public schools."

Meanwhile, the Walton Family Foundation gave an initial \$2 million to the Recovery School District to "re-design" public high schools in New Orleans. In mid-May, the foundation granted another \$4 million to implement the plan. "These redesigned high schools could be a very vibrant piece of the educational community for the next 50 years," Pastorek says.

It's an ambitious project, but one Vallas sees as eminently doable. "Our district is small enough to bring things to scale quickly," he says. "We can modernize classrooms, standardize our curriculum, redesign our high schools, put all of our instructional reforms in place and make a lot of progress in short order. Hopefully, the improvements in this year's test scores only hint at what's to come."

Usdin uses a house analogy to put the future of New Orleans public education in context. "We have laid a tremendous foundation for creating something incredible, but there's still a lot of hard building ahead of us," she says. "But do I have hope?"

"You bet I do. I have a lot of hope."

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