

August 21, 2006

## Rough Start for Effort to Remake Faltering New Orleans Schools

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 20 — On Debra Smith's third attempt to enroll her younger sister in a public high school here last week, patience evaporated. For the student, disappointment turned into tears.

Ms. Smith said the school her sister, now a 10th grader, attended before Hurricane Katrina — one of just five the city is still operating — turned her away because of poor grades. Two other options were full.

“Why am I still sitting here begging to get a child into school?” Ms. Smith asked at a registration center teeming with confused and angry parents. Many saw their schools disappear with the storm, replaced by a small but labyrinthine system of state, city and charter-operated schools, each with its own rules, applications and starting dates.

“Why should I think the schools are going to be any better if they can't handle the registration process?” she asked. “Where's the space for these kids?”

For parents throughout the city, the first post-storm back-to-school season is having an inauspicious start. But it is perhaps most chaotic for those relying on a new state effort to rescue dozens of city schools that were a disaster even before Hurricane Katrina. The storm offered one of the worst school districts in the nation an opportunity for rebirth in the Recovery School District, state officials said.

The Recovery District, which was created in 2003, included five schools before the hurricane. But the district really began to take shape when the state took over 107 of the city's worst-performing schools shortly after the storm. The [Louisiana](#) Department of Education had already considered the city school district to be in “academic crisis,” but after the hurricane, the district neared collapse. The state's goal was to help the schools meet national performance standards and match the state graduation rate, among other things.

“The mission of the R.S.D. is to create a world-class public education system in New Orleans, in which every decision focuses on the best interests of the children,” the state's promotional literature said.

Those lofty goals are at risk now because of a late start to planning for the school year. Well into the summer, it was still unclear how many schools would be chartered and how many teachers and classrooms would be needed. In addition, more students returned to New Orleans than state officials had expected.

The state began interviewing and hiring the hundreds of teachers needed for its Recovery schools only about a month ago. It has about 60 percent of the teachers it will need on Sept. 7, when 8,000 students are expected for the first day of school.

Compounding the problem, the district, with 17 schools, has only 10 administrative staff members, and they are not yet working in permanent offices. In addition, the district has said that at least one storm-damaged school building will not be ready before classes begin, and others face the same risk.

“It’s going to be a challenging year,” said Siona LaFrance, the district’s communications director. Ms. LaFrance added, though, that the district had just signed a lease for office space and that it would be hiring more staff members. She said the district hoped to avoid recreating the bloated bureaucracy of the old school district.

Still, the shaky start has deflated some of the optimism many residents had when they heard about the state taking over schools that the city had mismanaged over the years. It is particularly worrisome to those who are depending on the schools.

“That’s hurting to your heart when a child says, ‘Mama, I want to go to school,’ and you can’t find one,” said Yvonne Thompson, who is raising a 14-year-old granddaughter who needs special-education classes. Standing outside a registration center, Ms. Thompson added, “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Robin Jarvis, the superintendent of the Recovery District, said no child would be denied a space. But Dr. Jarvis added that officials were grappling with having more students back in the city than had been expected. Nine of the 17 Recovery schools are already at capacity.

“We are operating more schools than people envisioned in the beginning, and there’s more manpower needed,” she said. “I think people anticipated a slower rate of return.”

Some fear that the opportunity to remake New Orleans by rebuilding the faltering core of its public education system is being squandered by a lack of planning. Many residents believe that the absence of a highly functioning educational system and the city’s notoriously high crime rate have been intertwined for decades.

While the state was working on its district, several local and national groups began creating charter schools, a system within a system that has grown to the largest group of charter schools in the nation. This fall, 33 of the schools are scheduled to open, receiving public money but operated by independent groups.

Some charter schools, however, have admissions requirements or the authority to reject students for a variety of reasons, the most common being lack of space. In addition, four of the five city-run schools have selective admission policies, based on academic and other factors. Students who cannot find a spot in a charter or city school will have to turn to the Recovery District, which is obligated to create space.

Out of concern that some charter schools were not accepting the most challenging students — those with physical or learning disabilities — the state added a clause to its contracts in May, Dr. Jarvis said, requiring them to admit a certain percentage of students with disabilities.

“There were some cases where parents said they were having trouble locating schools that would take them,” Dr. Jarvis said. “Part of our reasoning was to reduce that and say our expectation is that you will provide for these students.”

About 25,000 students are expected to enroll in public education in New Orleans this fall. Before the storm,

the city had 65,000 students in more than 100 public schools.

Thousands of public school students who were accepted into charter or city schools have already begun classes. Many openings went smoothly, and parents have lauded the range of choices that was not available before the storm.

But it will be years before it is clear whether those choices lead to higher student achievement and better school performance.

“I think things are looking much, much better than they ever looked,” said Tanya Fobbs, a food service worker with two children who will be in public schools this year. Ms. Fobbs applied to charter and traditional schools, and is waiting to hear where her children have been accepted.

Many remain unsure, calling the new landscape fragmented, uncoordinated and uneven in terms of resources. Some charter schools, for instance, have proved to be powerhouses in winning approval for their ideas and galvanizing resources. Others, particularly in poor areas, have had trouble just getting started.

“We’ve created the most balkanized school system in North America,” said Lance Hill, director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at [Tulane University](#). “The average parent is mystified.”

Many reserve their harshest criticism for the Recovery District.

“It seems to me that the whole Recovery thing is hype,” said Jerome Smith, the longtime director of a community center in the Tremé neighborhood. “Here you have people, supposedly professionals, who don’t have teachers for the schools, and at the same time have not prepared well for this transition. They are going to be excused for their professional shortcomings, but the children will be penalized forever.”

Belden Banks said his 17-year-old niece wanted to drop out of the 12th grade last week after having registration problems at Clark High School. She was told she needed to bring a legal guardian, but she does not have one. The teenager has been separated from her displaced parents since the storm, Mr. Banks said.

“They should have made sure kids didn’t have any of these problems because they’ve been through so much already,” he said. “Just a few more classes until graduation, and now she’s all upset and wants to quit.”

He continued: “If they turn kids away, guess where they’re going to end up? On the corner. You hear about it when they get killed.”

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