

New Teachers Are New Orleans Norm

Hundreds of fresh recruits, many of them new to K-12 teaching, are filling public school classrooms across the city in Katrina's aftermath.

By [Erik W. Robelen](#)

New Orleans

When Nancy J. Glickman told friends and colleagues she was leaving her life and legal career in Winchester, Va., to teach in a public school here in post-Katrina New Orleans, she got a few surprised reactions.

"Most people thought I was nuts," said Ms. Glickman, who spent three decades as a lawyer representing low-income people in civil matters. "Or I got a lot of, 'Boy, I think that's great, but I could never do it.' "

That may be, but hundreds of people, whether professionals changing careers, veteran teachers, or recent college graduates, have left their homes and headed for the Big Easy to teach following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The state-led Recovery School District, which now operates 34 New Orleans public schools, dramatically increased its teacher workforce for this academic year, having hired some 450 teachers. It faced sharp criticism in early 2007 for not having enough teachers, as well as questions about the quality of some teachers hired.

As of the start of this month, the RSD reported a small surplus of teachers, thanks to aggressive recruiting efforts, hiring incentives, and a student population that, while still growing, is smaller than predicted. RSD officials and some observers express confidence that a strong pool of educators is now joining the city's ranks, though many recruits are new to the field.

New and expanding charter schools also hired many teachers for this academic year. Official numbers were not available, but one expert estimated between 250 and 300 new hires by charters.

It's too soon to say what all the new hires will mean for this city, which has a history of academic woes that far predates Katrina. Classroom management—keeping students focused and in their seats—has been one of the hardest problems so far for Ms. Glickman and some fellow teachers at her school.

“The meek need not apply for these jobs,” said Paul G. Vallas, the former schools chief in Philadelphia and Chicago, who in July became the new RSD superintendent. “These are very tough kids. ... It’s deep poverty combined with the trauma suffered from this natural disaster.”

Teachers’ union officials issued a report in June raising concerns about the large number of inexperienced teachers in the city’s classrooms last school year. But in a recent interview, Brenda Mitchell, the president of United Teachers of New Orleans, emphasized what she sees as the real challenge ahead: adequately supporting those teachers to help them succeed and ensure they stick with their jobs. That’s a sentiment echoed by many observers and education leaders.

“We as a union welcome them,” Ms. Mitchell, whose union is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, said of the many novice teachers here. “We want to sound the call to [state and local officials] that you provide them what they need.”

‘Trial and Error’

Mary D. Coghill Elementary School, where Ms. Glickman teaches, offers a visible reminder of Katrina’s toll. Gleaming new modular classroom facilities surround a brick school building that’s boarded up and enclosed in a tall chain-link fence.

The campus, which enrolls nearly 500 students, mostly from low-income families, was one of 11 schools run by the Recovery School District that reopened this September for the first time since the hurricane. These newly opened schools tend to have especially high concentrations of teachers new to the profession; at many of the schools, a majority are novices.

District officials estimate that about 185 of the 450 teachers hired at state-run schools for this academic year lack prior K-12 teaching experience. As of early this month, about 1,030 teachers worked in those schools, which serve about 12,000 of the city’s estimated 33,000 students.

The city’s charter schools, which serve most of the remaining students, are believed to employ roughly 1,300 to 1,400 teachers, though official figures were not available.

Ms. Glickman, who has taught law-related courses at the community college level and in training seminars, found her way to New Orleans after first reading a newspaper story that described TeachNOLA, an initiative that places teachers in RSD-run schools and charters.

She attended a six-week crash course in precollegiate teaching this past summer through TeachNOLA. Now, she’s teaching social studies to 7th and 8th graders in Gentilly, a section of New Orleans that underwent severe damage from Katrina.

The new job has been a huge adjustment for Ms. Glickman, as it has been for some of her colleagues at Coghill Elementary—a pre-K-8 school where about two-thirds of the faculty are new to teaching at the precollegiate level.

In fact, Coghill’s principal, Aisha M. Jones, is leading her own school for the first time, though she has about a dozen years of experience as a teacher and teacher-leader. She sees pros and cons to having so many novice teachers.

“Part of me says I did end up with a sweet deal,” she said, citing the teachers’ eagerness, openness, and flexibility, which she says allows her more leeway to shape the school. “Part of me says, well, it’s all the more effort we have to make. ... We have to support them.”

Walker M. Creech, a New Orleans native who teaches 7th and 8th grade mathematics at Coghill, said he’s had to learn a lot on the job.

“The first portion of the job is just filled with trial and error, good experiences and bad,” said Mr. Creech, 32, whose résumé includes teaching English in Korea, earning an M.B.A., and working at an advertising agency. “I have a notebook full of ideas of things that have worked and haven’t worked.”

Casting a Wide Net

State and local leaders employed a multipronged effort to draw more teachers to the city, including tapping Teach For America and the New Teacher Project, two national nonprofit groups based in New York City.

Teach For America, which recruits top college graduates for two-year teaching jobs, brought 115 new corps members to the greater New Orleans area this academic year, 95 of whom serve in the city’s schools. Next year, it plans to provide close to 200 more for the area.

The New Teacher Project runs the TeachNOLA initiative, which recruited 177 teachers from Louisiana and beyond—including many professionals switching careers—for the city’s charters and state-run schools this academic year.

The RSD also conducted its own national recruiting campaign, with newspaper, radio, and television ads. And most charter schools have done much of their own recruiting.

“You really have to dig hard and dig far to get a good candidate,” said John Alford, who leads the Langston Hughes Academy, a new charter school that serves grades 4 and 5. He found most of his teachers outside Louisiana.

“We have quite a few first-year teachers, and some with two or three years, and a couple of veterans,” he said.

Roslyn Johnson Smith, the president of the Treme Charter Schools Association, which operates the McDonogh 42 Elementary Charter School, said that all but one of the school's 24 teachers have taught previously.

"The first step in recruitment for us was to find a seasoned principal with a good reputation who could be a drawing card for former teachers in the system," said Ms. Smith, who writes a blog, "[Starting Over: A Post-Katrina Education](#)," hosted on www.edweek.org, *Education Week's* Web site. "If you don't have a critical mass of experienced people, you will have some very rough waters in the first or second year."

'Too Soon to Tell'

In June, the New Orleans teachers' union, along with its state and national counterparts, issued a report criticizing what it termed the "folly in pursuing a one-dimensional, 'no experience necessary' approach to teacher staffing in New Orleans" since Hurricane Katrina. It estimated that in the 2006-07 school year, veteran teachers—defined as having three or more years of experience—made up nearly half the teaching force in RSD-run schools and the charters the RSD oversees.

"The firing of virtually all experienced teachers and other school district staff in December 2005 prompted a mass exodus of experienced teachers," the report said, though it acknowledged that before Katrina, "well-credentialed teachers were already in short supply."

After the storm, the state of Louisiana required most teachers to reapply for their jobs and did away with the collective bargaining agreement that had covered them.

The union report argued that a strong link exists between experienced teachers and higher student performance.

But others point to a new state-mandated study in Louisiana that offers evidence that novice teachers can produce results at least as good as veterans'. It found that three alternative-certification programs produced teachers in math, science, and social studies who performed as well as, or in some cases better than, experienced teachers in public schools.

The union report also criticized what it called "a working environment that is fundamentally hostile to teachers' personal and professional needs."

In an interview this month, the New Orleans union president offered a softer tone toward more recent teacher-recruitment and -support efforts. She said she's heard some encouraging words from Mr. Vallas.

"We're not trying to rush to judgment," Ms. Mitchell said. "It's a little too soon to tell" whether the RSD's efforts under Mr. Vallas will be sufficient to support and keep teachers.

Mr. Vallas said there were real problems with hiring for last school year, before he was in charge of the state-run district.

“It was just, ‘Get a warm body in front of the kids,’ ” he said. “This year, it’s been much more systematic. We had a large pool of candidates.”

Mr. Vallas said the recovery district is making efforts to move ineffective teachers out. The RSD also has set a January deadline for the estimated 14 percent of teachers working without any credentials to enroll in appropriate programs.

In addition, Mr. Vallas said he has replaced all but one principal at RSD-run high schools. The superintendent cited a range of supports for teachers: regular professional development; elementary class sizes limited to 20 students; a teachers’ advisory group to help resolve classroom-resource issues; and special financial incentives.

In addition, the RSD is moving to standardize the curriculum. “Where you eliminate the margin of error is by giving [teachers] the very best curriculum and instructional materials, and the best classroom support,” Mr. Vallas said.

‘A Do-Gooder’

Several teachers interviewed recently at Coghill Elementary praised their principal for being supportive, but expressed some frustration with the Recovery School District’s central office.

They reported that much of the new technology in their classrooms still was not fully operating. The teachers pointed to curriculum-related materials that hadn’t arrived. They said support for special education students, who are included in regular classrooms, was inadequate. Then there’s the school’s unreliable copying machine, a sore point for teachers, who say they even have had to supply their own paper.

The teachers interviewed, all recruited through TeachNOLA, offered mixed reviews of that program’s summer training institute, and of their ongoing coursework toward full certification at the University of New Orleans.

Ms. Glickman, the former Virginia lawyer, said she found some parts of the institute helpful, but her classroom observations were in a 1st grade class, a far cry from her 7th and 8th graders. Mr. Creech, the native New Orleanian, said he wished the institute had better prepared him to manage student behavior.

Late last month, Coghill Elementary made some strategic changes to the middle grades, including adjusting the schedule and class rosters, and adding a teacher. Ms. Glickman and Mr. Creech said they were encouraged by the changes, seeing them as a chance to re-establish themselves with students to help ensure more orderly and focused classrooms.

“I knew I would not change the world,” said Mr. Creech, but he hopes his work will help the city. “I want to raise my kids in this town, and at least I can say I tried.”

Despite daily challenges, Ms. Glickman considers herself lucky. Some new teachers she knows at other schools face more severe problems, and are having a tough time coping. She knows two people who quit.

But Ms. Glickman, who has two grown children, has no regrets. “It was kind of the best of all my worlds,” she said. “It was teaching, it was still being a do-gooder, and it was in a place I love.”

Some students have asked her why she made the career change and came here. “I tell them, ‘It’s because I really care about you guys,’ ” she said.

“They’ve asked me that question more than once,” she said. “I think they like hearing the answer.”

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EXTRA EFFORTS:

One prime source of new teachers this academic year was TeachNOLA. The initiative was jointly developed by the state-run Recovery School District and New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit charter-schools support organization. TeachNOLA is run by the New Teacher Project.

TeachNOLA Recruits:

Teachers hired: **177**

RSD-run schools: **111**

Charters: **66**

Teaching Fellows Program:

(applicants lack prior teaching credentials)

Applicants: **1,464**

*Hired: **126**

Fully Certified:

Applicants: **824**

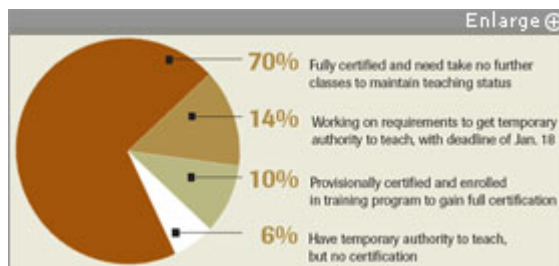
Hired: **51

** Fellows are provisionally certified in Louisiana and enrolled in programs to earn full certification.

SOURCE: TeachNOLA

STAFF'S STATUS

The licensing status of the roughly 1,030 teachers working for New Orleans' state-run Recovery School District varies considerably.



SOURCE: Recovery School District

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

Louisiana has offered incentives to attract and retain teachers and nonteaching professionals for New Orleans schools operated by the Recovery School District. Some charter schools overseen by the RSD also participated in the relocation incentive.

RELOCATION INCENTIVE

Award:

- \$2,500 maximum for moving costs
- \$400 per month for one year for housing costs
- \$5,000 re-signing bonus per year for two years

Eligibility:

- Hired as teacher (or other school-based professional) for the 2007-08 year
- Nonresident of Louisiana or resident displaced to another state post-Katrina
- Holds Louisiana certification or successfully transfers out-of-state certification to Louisiana
- Commits to work in RSD schools for three years, and receives satisfactory evaluations

RETENTION INCENTIVE

Award:

- \$5,000 one-time payment
- \$1,000 one-time payment for support staff

Eligibility:

- Employed during the 2006-07 academic year as teacher, nonteaching professional, or support-staff member
- Holds Louisiana certification or successfully transfers out-of-state certification to Louisiana
- Commits to work in a RSD school for three years and receives satisfactory evaluations
- Successfully completes work in RSD school through first nine weeks of the 2007-08 year

SOURCES: Recovery School District; and TeachNOLA