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**The Plight of the Education
Systems—Post Hurricane Katrina:
An Interview with Dr. Brenda
Mitchell and Dr. Linda Stelly**

Theresa Perry

Dr. Brenda Mitchell is president of the United Teachers of New Orleans. She was raised in the city of New Orleans and has called New Orleans her home for over fifty years. She is a graduate of the New Orleans public schools. Dr. Mitchell received her undergraduate degree from Southern University of New Orleans, her Masters +30 from the University of New Orleans, and doctorate degree in developmental education with a specialization in instructional systems from Grambling State University. Dr. Mitchell began her teaching career in 1968. She has served in many capacities in the New Orleans Public schools—elementary school teacher, Title I staff developer, and a Title I math and reading teacher. She was the founding director of both the New Orleans Teacher Center and the United Teachers of New Orleans Center for Professional Growth and Development. In 1999, she was elected president of the United Teachers of New Orleans. She brings to this position a commitment to teachers' professional development and highlights the necessary role that teachers must play in the reform of city schools

Dr. Linda Stelly works as the Associate Director for Educational Issues for the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in Washington, D.C. Her role includes coordination of the AFT's Redesigning Schools to Raise Achievement Project. Stelly has facilitated leadership and results-based reform solutions, designing communications strategies for administrators and decision makers in local and national institutions. She has coordinated research initiatives in the areas of local and national policy development and strategic planning. She has developed proven practice leadership strategies for accountability and effective teaching behaviors from a multicultural perspective. A graduate of Dillard and

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Loyola Universities, she is a resident of the New Orleans community and serves on the mayor's advisory committee for education.

Dr. Theresa Perry interviewed Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Stelly by phone on 28 February 2006.

PERRY

Could you tell me what has happened to public education in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina?

MITCHELL

I think that [public education] has been systematically dismantled. They have disenfranchised poor and underclass people.

PERRY

Tell me exactly how you think this has happened.

MITCHELL

Our initial conversation was about how we were going to reopen New Orleans public schools. There were written documents that were generated, and then I began to hear rumblings about charter school money. The first meeting we had with the state superintendent, he said to us that the schools would not open this year. My question to him was, "Why won't schools open this year?" He said, "The buildings are in disrepair."

PERRY

And he's saying 117 schools wouldn't open?

STELLY

None of them would open.

MITCHELL

I wasn't quite sure about what was going on. But what I found out was that there was some federal money that was set aside for charter schools, which was under the state and from the work of Senator Mary Landrieu.

PERRY

Was this money set aside before Katrina or after Katrina?

STELLY

Post-Katrina. There was \$21 million allocated for the expansion and improvement of charter schools in Louisiana. Pre-Katrina, there were approximately seven charter schools.

MITCHELL

I began to hear about the money at the state superintendent's office. And I began to have the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) look into it. The only way schools could open, we were told, was because there was going to be some money for our charter schools. And he would have to use that money to operate schools since the state wasn't going to have any money.

STELLY

The district was in default as far as paying its bills, as far as paying teachers, employees. The district had already been taken over financially by the state, because the board was determined to be fiscally inept, due to the lack of financial stability. Hence, [the state] appointed a private contractor to manage the finances of the district. This was all pre-Katrina.

PERRY

So the finances of the district, but not the operation and management of the schools, had been taken over prior to Katrina?

STELLY

Correct...And pre-Katrina, schools had student achievement levels that had improved significantly.

MITCHELL

If you look at our accountability scores, our initial baseline data was 2000. And at that point, (based on) our scores, we had to make 15 points. It's now at 60. And while many of our schools are still below what they should be, they have progressed tremendously. As a matter of fact, this year, 93 have made positive growth. And 88 have met their AYP. But that isn't publicized.

STELLY

So that's 93 schools showing improvement according to the state accountability system... So that was 93 out of 117 schools and eighty-eight made the Annual Yearly Progress...(as) required by No Child Left Behind...

PERRY

So after Katrina, what happened at the state level?

STELLY

Post-Katrina the state had determined that no schools would be opened. However, with the statement that no schools would be opened, Dr. Mitchell challenged that.

MITCHELL

Yes. As a matter of fact, our union filed a suit to compel the school district to open schools. We did that on November 8 and have since amended our suit to include the state board of education and the Louisiana Recovery School District because they're also responsible for educating students in the city of New Orleans right now.

PERRY

On what grounds did the state take over all the schools?

MITCHELL

We have something that's called Act 35, which authorized (post Katrina) the state takeover of any school whose score was at or below the state average.

PERRY

Did Act 35 apply to the other schools in Louisiana?

STELLY

The legislation was advanced for a city larger than 400,000.

T. PERRY

So in essence it was just for New Orleans?

STELLY

Right after the funding (\$21 million) was appropriated, the highest-performing schools in the city of New Orleans applied for charter status. And what gave them the authorization to do it was the governor, [who also] issued an executive order eliminating all of the protocols necessary for schools to convert into charter status. As a result of that, Benjamin Franklin, which is largely White and [is] the highest-performing school in the state, recognized nationally, [became a charter school]. From there was established the Algiers Charter Association, which then brought in all of the schools—thirteen schools—in the driest part of the city. Algiers is part of New Orleans, but it's on the west bank side of New Orleans, which is more adjacent to the business district and the St. Charles Avenue corridor.

PERRY

So all the schools in this section of town became charter schools?

STELLY

Right.

MITCHELL

However, the representative from that district last year put it in a bill to the legislature to have that area secede from New Orleans. And so, there's no coincidence. I think this was in the making for some time now. They wanted to have the city for themselves. So they wanted all thirteen of the schools. This provided them the opportunity.

PERRY

Who is in charge of these 102 schools that have been taken over?

STELLY

The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the State Department of Education are the governing authorities for these end of line Recovery Districts.

PERRY

I have read in the press that there are twenty public schools open. How many of these schools are charter schools and how many are regular public schools?

MITCHELL

Regular public schools, there are four open, that's it.

PERRY

You had about five thousand teachers, approximately 85 percent Black teachers. What has happened to all the teachers?

MITCHELL

They're all over. We have people in thirty-eight states. The largest group we've seen is actually in New Orleans.

PERRY

Is it true that all the teachers were fired?

MITCHELL

Yes. They were all terminated. It was supposed to be on January 31, but we got a stay.

They'll all be terminated as of March 27, which means they don't have any benefits.

PERRY

So, initially, the teachers were fired and AFT went to court on their behalf?

STELLY

Correct.

MITCHELL

Initially, they put the teachers on disaster leave, but there really is no such thing as disaster leave. Nothing like this has ever happen to schools. They called it the disaster leave so they could get unemployment.

PERRY

So these charters schools, are they hiring union teachers?

MITCHELL

They are hiring [some] union teachers. But once they become a charter school staff member, they won't have collective bargaining. What the charter schools did, which they had the option to do as a part of the application process, is that they can state in the application whether they want to allow collective bargaining for their employees or not.

PERRY

When we were down in New Orleans, a couple of teachers currently teaching in charter schools told us that they had had to sign a statement saying that if they disclosed their salary they would be fired. Have you heard of this from teachers?

MITCHELL

Yes. They are really working under the worst conditions. And you know that's so unfortunate because they're trying to earn a salary to take care of their families. They're very vulnerable. And they're being misused.

PERRY

What is happening to the retirees in terms of their health benefits?

STELLY

Retirees are eligible for health insurance after their retirement. As a result of this termination action, their health care premiums have tripled, if not exceeded that level.

PERRY

So what are they paying a month?

STELLY

Originally, retirees paid approximately \$200-\$500 per month depending on individual or family enrollment. Now they are paying from \$400-\$1200 a month.

PERRY

I understand that the AFT is filing suits on behalf of the families to get the state to open more schools?

STELLY

Right, to provide greater access to children in the city. The charter schools, some of them, have selective enrollment. Although, they all are supposed to be open access districts, open access schools, which leave a lot to be desired. However some charter schools have a cap on the percentage of special education students who can attend at 25 percent.

PERRY

One of the reasons you all are filing suit is because there are kids who can't get into the schools?

STELLY

[There are also] not enough schools for the number of children who are in the city.

PERRY

Would you say that the schools that opened as charter schools had an incentive to do so because they were getting extra money from the federal government?

STELLY

Yes, correct.

MITCHELL

However, if you have five potential charter schools, then \$20 million is one thing. But now we have nineteen, and that's not a lot of money. I've heard the rumblings because they haven't gotten the kind of funding that they thought they were going to get.

STELLY

All of the allocated \$21 million was only seed money. This is proposed as a one-time grant to get charter schools started or expanded, but not money for charter schools over time.

...

PERRY

The decisions have to be approved by whom?

STELLY

By the state, the operations manager, and then approved by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

PERRY

Who is controlling what is happening to New Orleans schools?

STELLY

External forces to the community.

PERRY

Can the charters pay people whatever they want to pay them?

MITCHELL

Yes.

PERRY

And, essentially, they can hire whomever they want to hire. But none of the schools are really under local governance?

STELLY

Four schools are still operating under the control of the local school board. And those four schools adhere to the United Teachers of New Orleans's (UTNO) contractual agreement until June of 2006.

PERRY

Has anyone talked to the people who are in New Orleans about what they want?

STELLY

Well, there were attempts, according to the Bring New Orleans Back Committee, where they were using the Internet to get feedback. There were some focus groups that were conducted among parents, students, and teachers. But I would say it would have been a highly select group of representatives in select circumstances, but not the community at large. And that was raised as part of the Bring New Orleans Back Committee—that the larger community who were consumers of public education was not involved in a meaningful way in a lot of this discussion.

MITCHELL

[This shows] the impact that politics has on education. To me, this was how Katrina gives

them authority to do things they probably wanted to do—talked about in some quiet rooms, away from public view, for over a year. And so, what they've done is to redesign public education. The state department says they will make the decision which schools will open and where they will open. And that they're also not going to allow our parents back into the community. You can't go back into the housing development unless you have a job or you sign on to get a job, to go to training or something of that nature. It seems that every opportunity they get, they do something to discourage our folk from coming back. They lost their jobs. They lost their homes. And there's just been no compassion shown to them. I believe that, when they designed all of this away from the people that are most affected by it, they intentionally disenfranchised us.

STELLY

It's more like "make sure you stay where you are because you are not really a contributing member of this community." There's no housing. The housing that exists is exorbitant. The rents have increased significantly wherever there is access to housing. And as Dr. Mitchell mentioned, in terms of the housing development, it has been stated that, unless you're employed or employable, then you are not going to get housing in the housing developments.

PERRY

So they're even keeping people out of public housing?

STELLY

It's just unbelievable. So the education issues, the number of children who will come back to repopulate these schools, will depend heavily on housing. It will depend on jobs. It will depend on transportation. Because as you saw in all of the Katrina pictures, the issue of transportation was what caused so many people to be left in New Orleans in the beginning.

...

MITCHELL

We are the largest union in the state. Getting rid of UTNO serves more than one purpose.

They have control over the teachers. But it's also a political move because we have a vote of 70 to 80 percent.

PERRY

What's the vision for the union? You all are filing suits. What is top on the agenda of the national office in terms of responding to what's happening to schools?

STELLY

One thing that we are trying to do is increase the communication among our members, not only our members but citizens throughout the country around the realities of what's going on. [We] need them to exercise their right to vote in these upcoming elections because while we don't have collective bargaining, we still have a union. And we have been sending out our updates to make sure they're informed about what's going on. And that also includes the tours that we're doing to different communities to meet with them. And when we meet them, we find that it's been the same everywhere—that they feel isolated. They feel like the school district has abandoned them. There's been no communication. There are many people out there who don't have access to the Internet, personally, who have told us stories about having to go to the library and wait in line to use the computer.

STELLY

At a point where there's a void in leadership on educational issues, in the city of New Orleans, AFT is supporting UTNO and ensuring that UTNO is seen as the leader in providing education for all children. That's within the charter schools as well as within public schools.

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PERRY

Do you think that the racial composition of the teachers in New Orleans will shift?

MITCHELL

The majority are African American teachers. But I'll tell you what we heard. They're

suggesting that they hire Teach For America teachers and the New Teacher Intern Project teachers, which are primarily White teachers, Caucasian teachers.

STELLY

Young teachers.

That would certainly have an impact on the percentage of African American teachers, also considering the percentage of them who are retiring because of financial need. The only income that they have available to them is their retirement. Teachers who have more than twenty years of service are eligible for retirement. Presently, we have more than two thousand of those who have already gone into retirement.

MITCHELL

Now we're going to have an impact on the number of African American teachers in the district, but we are also going to have an impact on those with the experience. The most senior veteran people are also going to be negatively impacted by this because they were forced to make those decisions in order to survive the situation.

STELLY

If 85 percent of the teaching staff are African American, and you have more than half of that eligible for retirement, when you think of the average years of experience exceeding twenty, you can clearly see with the recommendation that the New Teacher project and Teach For America students or whatever...then you're going to see this shift [of more white teachers]. And you're going to see this lack of cultural relevance in the educational process from there.

PERRY

Do you think the kids who are back in school are getting the psychological help they need?

STELLY

No. The youngsters are saying, explicitly, that there aren't enough counselors. They're seniors. They're youngsters who are going to graduate from school this year, but yet have not gotten their coursework. The counselors and teachers are doing the best job that they can possibly do. Unfortunately, the resources are not there. The ratios are too large. And those are places where additional support and resources need to be applied.

STELLY

The posttraumatic stress is absolutely there. And the mental health support does not exist

here in the city to the degree that it needs to in order to support young people.

PERRY

What is happening with the testing schedule for the children in school in New Orleans or in other parts of the state?

STELLY

The testing is on schedule. They're high-stakes tests where graduation and promotion are tied to the performance on the tests at grades three, five, and graduation. I think the state gave the schools some latitude around their school performance scores and the sanctions around No Child Left Behind.

MITCHELL

In addition, when we were in Houston, we found out that students that are attending school in Texas not only have to take the Texas state accountability test [but also] the Louisiana accountability test. These kids need to have some additional support. They're already behind because of what has happened to them. They're not getting any counseling or social services. And so, to me, it's very unfair. Then I heard recently, within the last month, that the federal government is going to waive the schools' performance accountability sanctions.

...

MITCHELL

And I'd like to add that I think that there are some lessons to be learned from the aftermath of Katrina, for things that people said they should not do. They should not rush—God forbid this ever happens to anybody else. But you don't rush to redesign a system, excluding the very people from the table who are impacted by it the most. And that includes parents. And it includes teachers and school support staff. I think that we had an opportunity, and we've missed it. And we could have sat down and crafted a plan that would work for all of us. We could have used a set of resources to our benefit. And then, to talk about educators, they could lend us the kind of support that we need to get those research-based programs, to talk to people about the best ways of educating African American youngsters, the best ways of working with urban poor, the best ways of how we can provide the social services that are direly need-

ed for these kids—where they are now and when they come back home—and how we, as a community, can put all of our resources together in order to do that.

AFTERWORD

The changes in the New Orleans public school system are proceeding at break neck speed. There is currently a bill in the Louisiana State Senate which would allow the state to sell, lease, or give New Orleans school buildings to any institution that has operated schools for 25 years. This would be done with a no-bid process. The money would not go to Orleans Parish. There is nothing in place to insure that the buildings, sold or granted at rock-bottom prices, would even continue to be used as schools, nor is there anything preventing private entities from reselling the buildings for monumental profit.

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Dr. Theresa Perry is a Professor of Africana Studies and Education at Simmons College and the Director of the Simmons College/Beacon Press Race Democracy and Education Lecture and Book Series. Her research and work in schools has recently focused on the development of a theory of practice for African American achievement and educational environments that normalize high achievement for Black students. Dr. Perry's areas of expertise include African American achievement, teacher preparation, school/college/community partnerships, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Among other publications, she is the coauthor, with Asa Hilliard and Claude Steele, of *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students* and is completing a book entitled *Educating African American Students: What Teachers, Teacher Educators and Community Activists Should Know*.

