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Up From the Ruins

A stopped clock, hanging upside down at Alfred Lawless Senior High School, symbolizes the damage Hurricane Katrina caused to more than 100 schools. —Sevans/Education Week

State and district leaders are fighting to rebuild and repair New Orleans' schools.

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Alfred Lawless Senior High School in the Lower Ninth Ward—home to about 900 New Orleans students before Hurricane Katrina—remains fixed in time on Aug. 29, 2005.

Cracked mud coats the gym floor. A hole the size of a pickup truck gapes open on the school's south side, revealing clumps of dangling, rotten insulation. Mildewed athletic shoes are strewn among shoulder-high weeds and piles of brick rubble. And on a moldy interior wall, a bulletin board displays faded photos of smiling graduates in gowns and mortarboards.

The 43-year-old school, which soaked for days in 15 to 20 feet of water following the storm, was one of the city's hardest hit. Many of its walls ruptured, and some of the

buildings on campus were pushed off their concrete foundations. Now, the fate of Lawless—the only public high school in the neighborhood—is tangled up in negotiations between state education leaders and Federal Emergency Management Agency officials over just how damaged the school is.

Trea Gautreaux, left, who works for a contractor with the Recovery School District, unpacks computer desks for a modular classroom.
—Sevans/Education Week

State leaders say the school is a total loss; FEMA, so far, thinks at least one building out of six might be salvageable. It's a dilemma leaders here are confronting school by school as they rebuild New Orleans' system of public education.

"School buildings remain our most pressing challenge," Paul G. Pastorek, Louisiana's state superintendent of education, who oversees a majority of the city's post-Katrina public schools, said in an interview last month. "We are not going to re-create what we had before the storm, which was woefully inadequate. But the rules do make that difficult."

More than 100 public schools in New Orleans were flooded in the hours after the hurricane struck. The roughly two dozen schools that didn't fill up with water suffered wind and rain damage. It was a devastating blow to old, already battered school buildings that were among the most rundown in the country. And the devastation created an unprecedented predicament for the city's post-Katrina education leaders: How do you revive a school system when 85 percent of your buildings are in some state of ruin? Which schools should be fixed? Which ones should be demolished? Who will pay the $2.5 billion that officials say it will cost to fix the buildings worth saving and to build new schools to replace those that are not?

Two years after Katrina, educators here are starting to resolve those questions. But first, officials in the Recovery School District, or RSD—the state-run system that took over

nearly all the city's public schools after the hurricane—had to prove they could do something far more fundamental. They had to provide clean, safe, and relatively modern classrooms for children and teachers this school year after rodents, mold, cold lunches, and overcrowded classrooms plagued many of the district's schools during the 2006-07 year.

To that end, Mr. Pastorek ordered a six-month, $108 million blitz—overseen by Louisiana National Guard Maj. Rodney Painting—to upgrade restrooms, renovate cafeterias, paint classrooms and wire them for technology, and install nine modular campuses in neighborhoods where no decent buildings were available. Those preparations went down to the wire as district officials hustled to deliver all the improvements by the first day of school last month.

At Agnes L. Bauduit Elementary School in the Uptown neighborhood, workers were spraying Julie Cannon's 1st grade classroom walls with an eye-stinging mold remover just five days before her 20 students would arrive on Sept. 4. Volunteers were on standby to paint Ms. Cannon's classroom, while she unpacked boxes of new textbooks. The veteran New Orleans teacher said it had been a rare year during her career to have so many supplies available before school started.

"It may not seem like a big deal, but to have all of these supplies and to have them five days ahead of time is so exciting," she said.

There have been some glitches. Four modular campuses weren't ready when school started, forcing district officials to house students from five schools in temporary quarters. Mr. Pastorek said conditions at Live Oak Elementary School—particularly an aging electrical system that stalled efforts to wire classrooms for new computers—fell short of the standards the district had promised. By the second week of the school year, his team was making plans to relocate the school to another building.

As RSD officials zeroed in on getting the basics in place, they also made progress on more complicated, long-term improvements. Last month, Mr. Pastorek, along with Paul G.Vallas, the superintendent of the Recovery School District, announced locations across the city where one new school will be built and where four others will be completely overhauled to be "as good as new." Demolition and groundbreaking, they promised, would begin by December, and the schools would be ready by the fall of 2009.

Only three schools—all elementary campuses—have been built in New Orleans since the 1970s. "This jumpstarts a longer-term process that we envision will bring several new schools to this city," Mr. Pastorek said.

The state superintendent solicited detailed proposals from neighborhoods and community groups to weigh in on which schools should be rebuilt first and where. Proposals for three elementary campuses and two high schools were selected out of 17 that were submitted.

Al Dorsey, left, helps Jolivette Lewis, the owner of a fencing company, put up a chain-link fence around the damaged Holy Cross High School building. — Sevans/Education Week

FEMA has pledged to cover the costs of building and reconstructing the five new schools in an agreement that Mr. Pastorek and his team spent months negotiating.

"It's really good that they've put some projects on the table," said Angela Daliet, the executive director of Save Our Schools New Orleans, an organization she founded after the hurricane to advocate for opening high-quality public schools. "I think that there should be 17 projects on the table at this point.We have the resources and a national spotlight that is starting to fade."

Ms. Daliet worked with the city's Hollygrove community—a disadvantaged neighborhood on the west side of New Orleans—to write a proposal to rebuild Paul Dunbar Elementary School in that neighborhood. The project was not selected.

A master plan that will guide reconstruction of the city's entire system of public schools is being developed by a New Orleans planning and architecture firm in partnership with a California-based construction- management company. The plan is to be ready by next spring.

That plans for new school construction are moving ahead in New Orleans is a dramatic turnaround from just a year ago, when the then-leaders of the Recovery School District struggled to repair enough buildings, even to minimal standards.

Broken-down cafeterias were not equipped to prepare hot lunches. Restrooms in many buildings stank, and some had no doors on individual toilet stalls. In a May survey of teachers working in the recovery district and in the five campuses still operated by the Orleans Parish school board, United Teachers of New Orleans reported that 99 percent of roughly 200 respondents said indoor-air quality in their schools was poor. The teachers reported excessive moisture, mold, and mildew. Fifty-two percent said they'd seen evidence of rodents, and 43 percent reported inoperable water fountains in their schools.

The conditions sparked outrage in the community, but they weren't so different from what had existed long before Katrina.

"For decades, it was the norm for most of the schools in New Orleans to have toilets that didn't operate well, for the plumbing to leak, to have broken windows, and electrical problems," said Nat LaCour, a New Orleans native. Now the secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers, in Washington, he served as the president of the New Orleans union for nearly three decades.

"And this is where children and teachers spent six hours a day, five days a week," Mr. LaCour said. "There is no question that those conditions led to many of the academic problems in New Orleans' public schools."

Barbara Colton, a kindergarten teacher, carries school supplies through a breezeway between buildings. —Sevans/Education Week

That schools here fell into and stayed in such disrepair is rooted in the demographic shift over the years that filled most of the city's schools with poor African-American children, Mr. LaCour said. Getting voters to support bonds or new taxes for school facilities has been difficult, he said.

"Much of the middle-class white community moved out of the city and put their kids in suburban schools," he said. "For those that remained, they put their kids in parochial or private schools, so they were paying tuition and didn't want to pay for public schools that their children weren't attending."

Louisiana's homestead-exemption law, which insulates people whose homes are valued under $75,000 from paying any property taxes, has also made raising revenue for school improvements tough, Mr. LaCour said.

Mr. Pastorek, a longtime New Orleans lawyer who became Louisiana's state schools chief in March, blamed the deterioration on neglect and the corruption of some district officials. He cited a $175 million school bond measure passed by city voters in 1995 to install air conditioning in all of the city's schools and to improve restrooms, which he described as "inhumane." At the time, only 40 of more than 120 schools were fully air-conditioned, he said.

“It took about nine years to do the construction for the air conditioning, which was ridiculously long,” said Mr. Pastorek, who served for a year on a committee overseeing the expenditure of the bond funds. “It’s shameful, but there were people who believed that because so many of these kids live in poverty, that they didn’t really need to have the best buildings.”

Mr. Pastorek has spent much of his seven months as state superintendent mastering the complexities of the federal Stafford Act, the law that governs FEMA’s responsibilities and how money is distributed in disaster zones. The biggest obstacle, he said, has been the specificity with which FEMA allocates money. In late August, he said, he had a chance to tell President Bush personally—during a presidential visit marking the second anniversary of the hurricane—that the statute has made it difficult to plan a large-scale rebuilding project for the city’s schools.

“For example, if we want to consolidate two schools that were damaged in the hurricane into one, then we are going to lose 25 percent of the recovery money for the school that would be folded into the other,” Mr. Pastorek said. “The process is not designed to improve the situation, but to re-create it exactly as it was before the storm.”

James Stark, the director of FEMA’ s Louisiana Transitional Recovery Office, said his agency is trying to be flexible and is working closely with Mr. Pastorek’s office to work out differences.

“We recognize that it may not be a good idea to build some of those schools back,” Mr. Stark said.

Part of that, he said, includes conducting a second round of assessments on school buildings that may not have been looked at extensively enough right after the storm. Schools that haven’t yet been ruled as more than 50 percent damaged by the hurricane—FEMA’s threshold for funding an entire replacement—could still be judged that way, he said.

The agency will continue to be a critical partner in rebuilding schools. Since the storm, FEMA has set aside $337 million to pay for the recovery and repair of storm-damaged public schools in the city of New Orleans. Of that, $277 million is for the Recovery School District to pay for its modular campuses and to repair and replace permanent buildings, while $60 million is for the small number of schools still run by the Orleans Parish school board.

FEMA reimbursements, along with federal community-development block grants that are administered by the state, will cover about $500 million of the $2.5 billion price tag for repairs and new construction, according to Mr. Pastorek.

“That makes FEMA’s recovery about 20 percent of the total, and that’s all they have programmed for us,” he said. “We hope to make it more.” Depending on the final damage assessments of dozens of school buildings, FEMA’s contributions could increase, Mr. Stark said.

As for Lawless Senior High in the Lower Ninth Ward, its future remains uncertain. Mr. Pastorek and FEMA are still debating the exact degree of devastation that the school suffered. The Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association, a community group helping residents return and rebuild their homes, proposed redeveloping the campus into a charter high school. The group pitched the idea of being one of the five new schools to be built or rebuilt by 2009, but it was not selected.

But with the Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology back at home in the neighborhood, some Lower Ninth Ward residents have started asking when a high school will return to the community for the 8th graders who move on from King.

Erma Dorsey, a custodian, sprays mold cleaner on the walls of a 1st grade classroom.
—Sevans/Education Week

Last month, the Recovery School District opened a high school on the south end of the Lower Ninth Ward in a maze of 24 modular buildings connected by elevated wooden walkways.

Installed on the site of Holy Cross High School—a Roman Catholic school ruined in Katrina’s floodwaters—the rectangular, beige buildings are a temporary home for George Washington Carver Senior High School students and Marshall Middle School students. The students are slated to move later this month into another set of modular buildings, which is being installed on their original campus in the Desire neighborhood.

Mr. Pastorek said he would like to see a permanent high school built in the Lower Ninth Ward.

In another part of the city—the Gentilly neighborhood—one of New Orleans’ first new schools will be built where a boarded-up middle school campus stands virtually untouched since the hurricane.

Karran Harper Royal, a long-time education advocate in New Orleans, lives in Gentilly and worked with her neighborhood association to write a proposal for building a new technology high school. She reached out to the Napa, Calif.-based New Technology Foundation, a group that supports the use of project-based learning and advanced technology in high school curricula, to be a partner for a new high school that she is calling “Gentilly Tech.”

“That we are getting a new high school in this neighborhood is historic,” Ms. Harper Royal said. “And this will be a school that will attract people back to the neighborhood and be open to all.”

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Vol. 27, Issue 06, Pages 27-30