

Katrina's Displaced School Children

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Luling, Louisiana

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Testimony

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Good afternoon,

I am Rodney Lafon, superintendent of the St. Charles Parish Public School System and a member of the American Association of Administrators Governing Board. Thank you Chairman Alexander, Senator Dodd and members of the Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development for allowing me the opportunity to speak before you today.

St. Charles Parish Public Schools, located about 20 miles from New Orleans, is in a unique situation as we have been directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina and are now positioned to offer assistance to our neighboring school districts. By state definition, St. Charles is both an impacted district and an assisting district.

St. Charles Parish was under a mandatory evacuation. The school district sustained \$5 million dollars in damages initially classifying us as an "impacted district." We were without electricity for days. Some areas of the district are still without phone service. People continue to stand in line to shop at local grocery stores. Some streets are lined with hurricane debris. Fifty of our teachers lost their homes during the storm and are living with relatives and colleagues. Assistance with temporary housing through FEMA has been slow.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, we continue to work collaboratively with other St. Charles Parish governmental agencies to re-establish normal school and work routines.

Without the extraordinary efforts made by these agencies along with countless volunteers, St. Charles Parish Public Schools would not be in the position to now assist other impacted districts.

After losing 12 school days due to Katrina, schools re-opened last week for our 10,000 students who were enrolled prior to the hurricane. At the same time we have received 1300 requests to enroll students. Approximately one third of these students already live in St. Charles Parish but previously attended private schools in neighboring parishes. The remaining two thirds have been displaced from their homes and have moved to our district to live with relatives and friends. As the year progresses, we expect our student

population to fluctuate as families continue to move from one area to another seeking permanent housing.

Each family comes to us with worries about how they will cope with their overwhelming losses. They wonder if their children will ever feel safe again. Our challenge is to not only meet the educational needs of these children but to also address the emotional well-being of these children during this time of crisis.

The children we are enrolling have endured many hardships within the last few weeks. Multiple families are living together, parents are without jobs, and children are worried about what tomorrow will bring. To offer some stability during these uncertain times, St. Charles Parish developed a plan to offer these children a quality education.

Staff has been working endless hours to develop a plan that will maintain the quality education provided to students prior to Katrina and to offer this same education and support to meet the needs of the students that we welcome into our school system who have been displaced by the hurricane. To do so, we had to make decisions about class sizes, classroom facilities, staffing, support services, special education services, transportation, food services, and materials and supplies without a commitment from state and federal government about how we will pay for these extra costs. To accommodate the additional students we have increased class sizes, converted available spaces to classrooms in existing schools, leased 18 school buses and 10 temporary classrooms and we have employed 25 additional teachers knowing we will need more. After losing almost \$100,000 in perishable food due to the power outage, our school cafeterias have had to re-stock to provide breakfast and lunch for students. Some of the enrolling students have severe disabilities requiring specialized equipment, health services, and additional personnel.

While we are willing to do our share to help our citizens and neighbors, we need immediate assurance that the residents of St. Charles Parish will not bear this financial burden alone. It is time for state and federal officials to make commitments about funding. Educating the additional students will cost approximately \$ 7,000,000 for the current school year.

This includes salaries for additional teachers, bus transportation, temporary classrooms, and instructional materials and equipment. As a relatively small school district, St. Charles Parish can not afford to absorb these additional costs. Federal funds need to be made available immediately as many of the expenses that we are incurring –such as teacher salaries—must be paid monthly.

We also need relief from some federal regulations. While we will continue to strive to achieve the goals of legislation such as NCLB, it would not be fair to students, schools, or districts to hold them accountable for many of these requirements during this most unusual year. Teachers are not able to meet the NCLB definition of “highly qualified” because many of the universities they were attending were flooded and have had to cancel classes. The disruption in the education of students and the unsettled living conditions that many families are experiencing make test scores unreliable this year. As a

result, any conclusions formed about student achievement and annual yearly progress will be unreliable.

Approximately 50% of the students registering in St. Charles Parish previously attended private schools. The No Child Left Behind legislation and state accountability did not apply to these students when they attended private schools. Now that they are enrolled in public school settings, these students are expected to comply with accountability regulations that impact both students and districts.

Finally, the McKinney-Vento act was not designed to address large numbers of students displaced by catastrophic events as the one we have experienced. Legislation should be presented to amend this law to make provisions for schools and school districts to have time to prepare and put an infrastructure in place that will support these students academically and emotionally.

To date there has been NO FIRM commitment from the state and federal government to provide funding assistance and regulatory relief for our district.

St. Charles Parish Public Schools has made a commitment to these students and has developed a plan to “make it happen’ addressing the district’s core business—teaching and learning.

We need your immediate assistance and support!