



## **DEMOCRATIC PROPOSALS TO OPEN AND REBUILD GULF COAST SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES**

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### **Bush Administration Fails to Provide Urgent Education Aid in Katrina Aftermath**

*"Families and business will not return and will continue to relocate, many of them out of state, until the infrastructure is repaired and children can be safe, healthy and educated at the best possible levels. Repairing and improving this infrastructure is critical to the recovery effort and should not be considered a secondary goal."*  
- *"Storms can push education ahead."* Editorial. *The Shreveport Times*, February 7, 2006

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## **Executive Summary**

A congressional delegation of Democratic Members from the House Committee on Education and the Workforce traveled to hurricane-devastated New Orleans in March 2006. Their meetings with administrators, educators, parents and students revealed several unsolved problems still facing K-12 school systems and universities and colleges as of March 2006.

### ***The Bush administration has failed Gulf Coast students and families in many ways:***

- 1) Assigned FEMA as the key agency dealing with disaster recovery for the education sector.
- 2) Provided insufficient funding to rebuild schools and restart school operations.
- 3) Limited the discretion of school officials in addressing local recovery needs.



***Less than two percent of the \$87 billion in federal assistance sent to Gulf Coast communities after the hurricanes has been directed to the education sector...***

### ***Democrats have several recommendations to help Gulf Coast schools, which are detailed in this report. The basic recommendations include:***

- 1) Establishing an Education Recovery Czar within the U.S. Department of Education to oversee the federal role in reopening and rebuilding schools and colleges;
- 2) Shifting responsibility for the federal role in education recovery from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to the U.S. Department of Education;
- 3) Providing additional funding – and allowing more flexibility in the use of that funding – for the education sector; and
- 4) Recognizing the unique needs of the education sector and providing school officials with greater decision-making authority.

## Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit land on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Storm surges from Katrina caused catastrophic damage, breaching the floodwalls in downtown New Orleans and ultimately flooding nearly 80 percent of the city. Katrina was responsible for more than 1,400 deaths and \$100 billion in damages—the costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

This report is intended to call attention to the fact that, eight months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast area, the education system and area colleges remain in crisis, and the federal government bears partial responsibility for this situation.

In mid-March of this year, a congressional delegation of Democratic Members from the House Education and the Workforce Committee spent two days in New Orleans and surrounding areas meeting with school administrators, college presidents, educators, university faculty and staff, school board members, parents, and students to learn firsthand the challenges facing students and the education community after Hurricane Katrina. Members toured neighborhoods, schools and college campuses to survey the damage caused by Katrina. During roundtable discussions and a public forum, Members heard from community stakeholders about the federal government's actions in the wake of the storms and what federal statutes, regulations, and policies act as barriers to education recovery efforts. Representatives from numerous educational institutions voiced two common concerns:

- The federal government has ignored the unique needs of the education sector and;
- The federal government has miscalculated the resources needed for the recovery effort.

When President Bush spoke from Jackson Square in New Orleans on September 15, 2005, he promised that “we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives...”. Accomplishing the goal of rebuilding Gulf Coast communities, however, will rest in large part on rebuilding and reopening schools and colleges. Schools are the lifeblood of any community. By establishing a richer cultural environment in a community, colleges and universities act as a magnet for people, businesses, and resources. They are also major employers themselves; for example, Tulane University was the largest employer in New Orleans before the Katrina disaster.

Yet despite the importance of educational institutions to the Gulf Coast's ultimate revitalization, less than two percent of the \$87 billion in federal assistance sent to Gulf Coast communities after the hurricanes has been directed toward the education sector. School construction needs for one school system alone could absorb the entire amount allocated by Congress for education relief.



*Repairs are in progress at the Delgado Community College.*

The current hurricane season is fast approaching, as is a new school year. This report examines the major challenges facing the education sector in communities affected by Katrina, and it offers several recommendations to help move the Gulf Coast forward after eight months of a failed response by the Bush administration.

## **K-12 System in Crisis**

Eight months after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans and in communities along the Gulf Coast, the federal government's failure to accurately estimate students' and families' needs and provide this critical assistance is visible in the landscape of ash-covered debris and empty school buildings. With schools playing not only the role of educator but also employer in many of these Gulf Coast communities, the price of this inactivity has tremendous consequences for the academic success of students in these communities and for the area's economic health.

### ***Lack of Flexibility With Federal Funds***

*Due to the categorical nature of many federal education programs, few programs allow for the transfer of funds between programs. Unfortunately, this places limits on the ability of school systems to allocate funds where they are needed on an emergency basis. For example, funds to prevent juvenile delinquency or drug use through the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program could not be used for teacher salaries, even though school districts are struggling to pay returning teachers and few if any of these programs are functioning due to the hurricanes.*

In Orleans Parish, home to the French Quarter, historic St. Charles Avenue, and the Lower 9th Ward, the effects of Hurricane Katrina are still keenly felt by families, schools and businesses alike. The New Orleans Public School system educated more than 60,000 elementary and secondary students throughout the city of New Orleans and employed more than 15,000 people prior to the devastation. St. Bernard Parish, located east-southeast of New Orleans, was home to 8,000 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade before the levees broke. Students who attend schools within the Archdiocese of New Orleans were also displaced as a result of the hurricanes. The Archdiocese educated more than 60,000 students in nine parishes before the storms.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the number of students and employees enrolled and working in these school systems has changed drastically, as has the infrastructure of the school system. Due to flooding from the levee breach, water swept into classrooms, libraries and cafeterias, rising to well over nine feet in some areas. This resulted in the total loss of heating and electrical systems, books, computers, desks, and athletic and band equipment in many schools. Mold replaced the storm waters after the flooding receded, exacerbating the cleanup effort and presenting new environmental and health hazards. Debris cleanup has been slow, and sometimes undertaken by returning residents hoping to retake their communities and schools from the devastation.

### **Unique Challenges**

Affected school systems in the Gulf Coast area are facing very unique challenges in their rebuilding and recovery efforts. At the time of the visit, roughly seven months after the storm:

- Only 20 schools out of 130 schools are open in the New Orleans Public School system, and most buildings require significant environmental remediation prior to the return of children to the classroom.
- Re-opened schools already face capacity issues resulting in overcrowded classrooms. More

*FEMA advised school systems that it would pay for temporary employees – new replacement teachers – doing emergency work, but would not pay for existing employees to continue teaching in pre-Katrina posts.*

students return each day seeking spaces in schools where there are none. One school system is enrolling 20-40 students per day.

- St. Bernard Parish has opened one of its 14 schools in the system. The Parish opened this “unified” school 11 weeks after the storm and has seen student enrollment for pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade increase seven-fold.
- The New Orleans Public School system announced in early 2006 that it will lay off 7,500 employees, and require the termination of health benefits for employees and increased health insurance premiums for retirees.
- Teachers face continued uncertainty about their homes and livelihoods. While one school system has arranged for trailers for staff to live in on school property, other teachers whose homes have been destroyed have left their communities to seek job opportunities elsewhere.
- Schoolbooks are in short supply for students who have returned to school. Computers, musical instruments and athletic equipment have yet to be replaced.
- Students who have returned are faced with limited after-school programs even though safe and supervised aftercare and learning opportunities between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. are needed now more than ever.
- Non-profit after-school programs are turning students away because there are no school or community facilities to host the programs.

### ***Lack of responsiveness and accountability***

The federal government’s lack of responsiveness and lack of accountability to local education sectors has added new and unnecessary challenges for school systems. Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) resources for schools are slow to appear and interactions between school systems and designated FEMA representatives are hampered by bureaucracy. The Hurricane Recovery Act, the only federal law authorizing assistance for elementary and secondary schools impacted by the hurricane, fell far short in providing the necessary assistance to schools in need. The State of Louisiana alone identified more than \$2.8 billion in funding needs soon after the hurricane. Unfortunately, the Hurricane Recovery Act provided only one-half of that amount for K-12 and higher education needs – and this amount was divided among all of the affected states.

The inability of the Bush administration to correctly estimate the needs of schools damaged by the hurricane is made worse by the lack of resources allocated for recovery. In addition, the delegation learned that:

- Schools systems were not provided with consistent or regular points of contact within federal agencies to assist them with specific recovery efforts.
- The lack of a permanent liaison with federal agencies delayed essential communications about recovery efforts, sometimes resulting in duplication of effort.
- While eligible for community disaster loans, local school systems are approaching bankruptcy or dealing with increasing debt and lack the funds needed to repay these loans.
- Federal law prevents any modernization of damaged schools; therefore, school facilities can only be rebuilt to the status that existed prior to the storm, even when electrical equipment or HVAC equipment is outdated.

*A common complaint by school administrators centered on the constant turnover of FEMA representatives.*

- Federal law requires school systems to provide matching funds if they intend to replace damaged structures with permanent facilities, but will reimburse 100 percent of the cost for temporary facilities that will ultimately have to be replaced.
- Federal assistance for teachers who have been displaced does not meet current health care or retirement needs of teachers and school employees.

### ***Lack of coordinated services***

Taken together, the education, health care and housing systems are the backbone of a community. Without them, a community cannot exist. The Bush administration's failure to understand the connections between these sectors and its lack of coordinated plans in the aftermath of the storms have slowed the recovery of Gulf Coast communities and made it harder for families to return.

The health care systems in New Orleans and surrounding areas have been severely compromised by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *The Times-Picayune* reported in a February 8, 2006 article on its website, nola.com, that:

“Only one of New Orleans' adult-care hospitals, Touro Infirmary, has reopened; a second, Tulane University Medical Center, is set to reopen Tuesday. Veterans who need in-patient treatment must travel to Veterans Administration hospitals in Alexandria; Biloxi, Miss.; Jackson, Miss.; or Houston. Medical centers in the suburbs are bursting with patients and struggling to keep pace with the region's returning population. Nurses, technicians and support staff members are in short supply. And efforts to reopen or to rebuild damaged hospitals could take years and cost hundreds of millions of dollars.”

The lack of housing for families displaced by the storm also continues to be of concern.

Teachers and parents complained that the trailers provided by FEMA are being distributed at a rate much slower than the rate of families returning to their communities. FEMA has also failed to accurately assess the housing needs of individual families. For example, the limited availability of trailers has forced multiple families to live together in a single trailer. In another instance, a single person may be provided a trailer more suitable for a four-person family.



*Representatives Scott, McCollum and Melancon meet with St. Bernard Parish cafeteria workers.*

Notwithstanding the deplorable housing situation, the Bush administration recently announced its opposition to a plan strongly supported by members of the Louisiana congressional delegation which would have provided federal resources to homeowners whose homes have been destroyed by the storm.

Without adequate housing and medical care, students, teachers and their families cannot effectively focus on education. The Bush administration's failure to accurately provide for a coordinated recovery plan for housing and health care, placing all of these critical community systems at great risk.

## **Federal Efforts Must Be Renewed And Sustained To Rebuild Education In The Gulf Coast Region**

The resilience of students, teachers and families who reside on the Gulf Coast is a strong indication that the education systems will return stronger and better than before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. However, the Bush administration's empty promises delay and hamper the rebuilding and recovery. Families want to begin to rebuild their homes but will only return with the assurance that their children will receive an appropriate education in a safe and non-hazardous environment. Students are eager to return to school to regain normalcy in their lives. Teachers want to return to work so that they and their students can continue what they started before the hurricanes. After-school programs are interested in working with schools and communities to offer safe spaces and constructive activities to students during the after school hours.

While the Bush administration has failed to accurately assess the needs of the education sector after the hurricanes, other government and non-government organizations have initiated discussions for moving the Gulf Coast education systems forward. The City of New Orleans has taken the important step of inviting various education stakeholders, community members, researchers and policy experts to make recommendations about the future of education in New Orleans. The Bring Back New Orleans Education Committee issued a report outlining a new system of public education in New Orleans using an "Education Network Model." The Urban Institute, a think tank concerned with issues impacting urban America, recommends, among other things, that the federal government provide a funding mechanism for a school facilities authority. Other organizations have recommended fully funding the federal school counselors programs and targeting funds for school-based mental health services to the hurricane-affected areas. But without appropriate and adequate federal resources, these recommendations are likely to go unheeded.

*One participant in the congressional forum was a 19-year old high school student who was displaced in the storm. A native of New Orleans, he and his family evacuated to Denham Springs, Louisiana. Although his house was destroyed as a result of flooding, he chose to return to New Orleans without his parents in order to graduate from his hometown high school, McDonough 35, a public school in Orleans Parish.*

## **Higher Education: New Orleans Colleges and Universities Devastated by Hurricane Katrina**

Much like the public elementary and secondary schools in New Orleans, flood waters from Hurricane Katrina ravaged the campuses of local colleges and universities, leaving many of the area's colleges severely damaged. In New Orleans alone, 70,000 college students were displaced.

### **Property Damages**

New Orleans' colleges suffered a total of \$1 billion in property damages. Dillard University, a historically black college and university, was decimated. The University's campus, less than a mile from where the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal levee broke, was completely flooded with more than 10 feet of water. (*Washington Times*, 2/28/06) College officials estimate the total property damages at \$500 million—more than the total damage to all the Mississippi colleges combined.

The entire campus of Xavier University of Louisiana, also a historically black college and university, was flooded with three to seven feet of water. Since the storm, Xavier has spent \$33 million to repair and rebuild the campus. College officials estimate that the final cost of rebuilding and repairing the campus will be \$40 million. Xavier's insurance will cover less than one quarter of these costs.

Other New Orleans colleges suffered similar damages: Delgado Community College suffered \$37 million in damages after parts of its City Park campus were flooded with 6-8 feet of water; the University of New Orleans sustained \$103 million in property damages due to Katrina; Tulane University, which was flooded with 1-5 feet of water, suffered \$150-\$250 million in property damage; and the Southern University at New Orleans, a historically black college and university, still does not have damage assessments or electricity on its campus.

### **Equipment And Operating Losses**

In addition to property damages, many of the colleges suffered significant operating and equipment losses. Tulane University officials estimate that Katrina caused \$90-135 million in operating damages in fiscal year 2006 and will cost another \$25 million in fiscal year 2007. Delgado Community College estimates their total equipment and information technology losses at \$24.5 million. Dillard's entire information technology department was destroyed due to the flooding.



*Dillard University students are using this temporary dining hall at the Riverside Hilton while their campus is being repaired.*

All of these impacted colleges lost an entire semester of revenue from tuition and fees. The University of New Orleans has experienced a 45 percent (or \$45.6 million) reduction in total revenue to date. About \$35 million of this loss was due to lost tuition and fee payments. For some colleges, such as Loyola University at New Orleans or Our Lady of Holy Cross College, which derive most of their revenue from tuition and fees, the lost tuition income is an enormous blow. Tulane University lost \$92.5 million in tuition revenue as a result of Katrina. In addition, University officials estimate that research losses and special collection losses will total \$120-150 million.

In addition, Loyola, Holy Cross, Tulane, Xavier and Dillard paid the salaries of their faculty and staff during the fall semester to help their employees and to try to retain their workforces, despite the decrease in revenue. Tulane incurred approximately \$150 million in payroll costs from August through December in order to retain staff until operational facilities became available. Our Lady of Holy Cross spent \$8 million, nearly all of their reserve funds, to pay the salaries of their faculty and staff.

### **Faculty And Staff Layoffs**

In the aftermath of Katrina, colleges were forced to make significant layoffs. As a result of the drastic terminations these colleges have been forced to cut their course offerings, eliminate programs, increase class size and increase the number of courses that faculty must teach.



- *Delgado Community College* laid off 103 faculty and staff members and accepted 104 resignations. Delgado also reduced their adjunct employees by 500 and reduced their part-time employees by 300.
- *Dillard University* laid off two-thirds of its faculty and staff.
- *Southern University at New Orleans* laid off 45 percent of its faculty and staff.
- *Tulane University* laid off 166 faculty and 415 full-time staff, while an additional 15 staff and 367 full-time staff voluntarily resigned.
- *The University of New Orleans* laid off 75 percent of its part-time positions and 16 percent of its full-time positions—including eliminating more than 200 faculty.
- *Xavier University* laid off 40 percent of its faculty and 60 percent of its staff.

### **Housing**

Seven months after Katrina hit New Orleans, thousands of the city's population—including college students, staff and faculty—are still homeless. Many students and staff are sleeping on couches in friends' homes while waiting for trailers from FEMA.

Currently, 1,600 students and faculty and staff members from Dillard University are living at the Hilton Riverside Hotel in downtown New Orleans. The University was able to secure one-third of all the rooms at the hotel and several of the ballrooms to set up classrooms and a temporary campus until Dillard's campus can be fully repaired. All of Dillard's student dorms must be gutted and rebuilt. The University expects to finish this process in the fall of 2007.



*Construction to rebuild the estimated \$500 million in damages at Dillard University is underway.*

Many of Southern University at New Orleans's faculty, staff and students lost their homes as a result of Katrina. To date, the University of New Orleans has received 900 requests from students for FEMA housing trailers and another 950 requests from faculty and staff, yet FEMA has only allotted 400 housing trailers. At the time of the congressional visit to the area in March, these trailers were expected to be made available in mid-April.

To provide housing for their students, faculty and staff, Tulane chartered a cruise ship, at its own expense. The cruise ship is costing the University \$2 million per month and although Tulane is charging the residents, their rent will not cover the costs. The University does not expect to be reimbursed for any costs that are not covered by rent.

### **Federal Response Fails To Meet The Needs Of New Orleans Students, Colleges And Communities**

Unfortunately, the Hurricane Recovery Act signed into law by President Bush this past December, falls short of the needs of Gulf Coast colleges, students and families. The Act provides a mere \$200 million for higher education assistance—\$95 million for Mississippi public colleges and universities, \$95 million to the Louisiana Board of Regents and \$10 million to

assist colleges that enroll students who have been displaced as a result of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita.

The Department of Education has announced that it plans to offer an additional \$30 million to help institutions of higher education that were directly impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as colleges that enrolled displaced students. Unfortunately, as colleges and universities continue to assess the damage and prepare for the next school year, it is clear that the need for additional resources grows far beyond that which the Bush administration is prepared to offer.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

It is critical that President Bush and Congress put significant new resources toward ensuring that New Orleans and other Gulf Coast schools and colleges are able to rebuild and contribute to the revitalization of the region.



*Representatives Miller, Tierney, McCollum  
Jefferson and Payne tour trailers housing  
temporary classrooms with Southern University at  
New Orleans Chancellor Victor Ukpolo.*

Currently, there is a mismatch between the assistance FEMA is providing and the needs of students, families and communities who were devastated by the hurricanes.

Simply put, the current system of emergency relief is outdated. FEMA is working from an old playbook that cannot be expected to adequately address a disaster of this magnitude.

Any federal agency administering recovery assistance must trust the schools, colleges and leaders on the ground and the decisions that they are making to get their facilities open and to serve their communities. The federal government also should advance monies to impacted schools and colleges to allow them to rebuild their facilities.

While schools and college have been creative and resourceful, they need additional assistance to ensure that they can continue to serve their communities. Specifically, Democrats support:

### **Recommendations by House Democrats**

***Designation of an Education Recovery Czar at the Department of Education:*** The education sector requires unique forms of disaster assistance. FEMA has proven itself to be a bureaucratic, slow-moving agency unable to provide the quick and rapid response needed by schools. The transfer of responsibility for the education sector from FEMA to the U.S. Department of Education will ensure that schools receive the assistance they need to recover, rebuild and return students to the classroom. The appointment of an Education Recovery Czar will also increase accountability and eliminate confusion over which agency is responsible for which function of disaster assistance.

***Increasing flexibility for local decision makers and removing barriers to accessing federal funds:*** Unfortunately, the Hurricane Education Recovery Act signed by President Bush

ignores the different needs of individual school systems by directing funds to the states, thereby adding new barriers to local recovery efforts. By allowing school districts to bypass the state and directly access already available funding, schools can immediately respond to disaster needs and move forward with the business of educating students. In addition, current restrictions in categorical programs should be lifted during federally designated emergencies in order to allow local school systems to allocate resources where needed. For example, on a temporary emergency basis, schools should be able to use Safe and Drug Free Schools Program funding to help defray other expenses, such as teacher salaries and school construction.

**Increasing funding for recovery efforts:** School districts need immediate access to funds to maintain and restore operations. Many school districts in Gulf Coast communities have lost the ability to rely on the local tax base for revenue and are now facing bankruptcy and the termination of benefits for employees. That is why, in addition to making it easier for schools and colleges to access already available funding, Congress should appropriate additional funding to help schools and colleges recover. Specifically, this funding is needed to:

- **Rebuild schools and campuses.** Even after insurance and assistance under the Federal Stafford Disaster Act, many of the affected schools, colleges and universities will fall short of the total lost revenue and rebuilding costs of Katrina.
- **Fund school operations and assist colleges in replacing computers and other critical research equipment:** Gulf Coast schools that lost their “central office” capacity require funds to help restart operations. The affected colleges and universities lost millions in computers and equipment. Assistance is needed to allow them to both provide a quality education to students and to ensure that colleges and universities can continue to earn critical research income.
- **Retain and recruit faculty and staff:** In order to remain in operation and to provide a top-quality education, affected colleges and universities require assistance to retain and recruit faculty and staff. To date only about one-third of New Orleans’s pre-Katrina population (of 463,000) have returned. Housing shortages, rent inflation, lost jobs and a lack of access to essentials such as electricity and phone service have forced many faculty and staff out of the city and from colleges and classrooms where they are needed.
- **Retain and recruit college students:** It is critical that impacted colleges and universities receive additional funds to help retain and recruit students. Some impacted colleges have had from 75 percent to about 90 percent of their students return to campus after Katrina. However, others have had half or fewer return.
- **Provide housing for students, faculty and staff:** Despite the critical need for housing, thousands of students, faculty, staff and their families continue to wait for temporary FEMA housing trailers.

Congress and the Bush administration must act now to ensure the recovery of the Gulf Coast area, starting with the school systems that have provided the foundation to these communities. Students, families and teachers deserve no less.