

The Louisiana Recovery School District: The Post-Katrina Saga of Thurgood Marshall School

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In November 2005, the Louisiana Department of Education assumed the awesome task of controlling over 100 schools in New Orleans, which were recently labeled failing schools. In assuming this task, then Governor Kathleen Blanco stated, "It took the storm of a lifetime to create the opportunity of a lifetime ... that the state take control and re-create" the New Orleans public schools. She went on to state that the takeover would create a "new birth of excellence and opportunity" for the city's school children. A document developed by state officials, promoting the takeover plan, identified the mission of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) as creating a "world-class" school system in which "every decision focuses on the best interests of the children."

Also, during this period, Gov. Blanco waived many rules governing the establishment of charter schools in Louisiana (Executive Order 05-79). Now, more than three and a half years later, many people in New Orleans and across the country are wondering what happened to the idea of creating a world class system that would focus on our children's best interests. A review of the high school LEAP/GEE scores (charter and non-charter demonstrates that high school students are not doing better than they were prior to Hurricane Katrina (Ferguson 2008).

In examining what happened, one has to focus on the Recovery School District (RSD) as it was given the task of improving over 100 "failing" schools in New Orleans. *RSD's* strategic goals state that *it will increase support to schools, and offer a superior learning environment for students returning to New Orleans*. A test of that RSD support can be assessed in the post-Katrina saga of Thurgood Marshall Middle School.

Marshall Middle School's Post-Katrina Dissolution

Currently, RSD has 26 charter and 34 non-charter schools in New Orleans, and it is supposed to provide increased support and a superior learning environment for each. But, a closer look at these two school structures reveals that the non-charters experience an inferior reality. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Thurgood Marshall Middle School was one of the premier public middle schools in New Orleans. During the 2004-2005 school term (the school year prior to Hurricane Katrina), the school posted the highest rating of any middle school in New Orleans Public Schools (including New Orleans Charter Middle School) and of most middle schools across the state of Louisiana. Many of its students went on to attend the city-wide access/magnet high schools (Franklin, McMain, McDonogh 35 and Easton) upon leaving Marshall. Marshall was one of several schools that would not have qualified for state take-over in November 2005, if the state had not

changed the rules after Hurricane Katrina (Act 35, amended). Pre-Katrina, the RSD could takeover schools with a School Performance Score of 45, which was subsequently changed to 60. The schools must have been labeled Academically Unacceptable for four consecutive years. Post-Katrina, any school with a School Performance Score less than the state average, which at that time was 87.4, could be seized. *If the pre-hurricane Katrina takeover rules had been applied, only 13 schools would have been taken over instead of the 102 schools given to RSD in November 2005* (Times Picayune, November 4, 2005).

The Marshall School building received minimal damages from Hurricane Katrina compared to other schools throughout New Orleans. The school was placed under control of RSD and did not open for the remainder of the 2005-2006 or the 2006-2007 school terms. During this period millions of dollars in renovations were completed on the building. During the summer of 2007, RSD announced that Marshall Middle School would re-open. On the first day of school in 2007, parents brought their children to the newly renovated Marshall building only to find that two charter schools (Langston Hughes and P. A. Capdau, a University of New Orleans Charter School) were in the building. The Marshall students were to be bused to modular buildings in the Lower Ninth Ward on the site of the damaged and abandoned Holy Cross Catholic High School. Holy Cross abandoned the site after Hurricane Katrina and moved to another neighborhood. There was no one from RSD to explain to parents and students why they were being moved or why their school was being occupied by two charter schools. The only explanation the parents and community received through the principal was that the charter schools' buildings were not ready so the charters schools were temporarily being placed in the Marshall building. Quite naturally, the Marshall parents asked why their children had to be displaced. *RSD ignored numerous calls and requests from parents.*

Upon arrival at the Holy Cross site, parents and teachers were shocked at the poor conditions; they did not have a school telephone, fax, or overhead shelter for students moving from one modular building to the next. As a result, children got wet when they went from one modular to another during rainy weather. They did not have adequate instructional supplies. Additionally, the Marshall students were occupying the site with high school students which created other challenges. *Once again, when the parents and teachers continued to contact RSD and Superintendent Vallas for answers, they received no response.*

Meanwhile, the principal was assigned her entire teaching staff without any input on the hiring. The faculty was comprised of one hundred percent first year teachers, who in most cases were not degreed professional educators (most came from Teach NOLA and Teach for America). *According to educational research, it is highly recommended that teachers and staff at the middle school level be highly trained and committed to work with middle school students (National Middle School Association 1995).* According to the principal, within two months of the start of the school, seventy percent of the faculty had quit or resigned. Besides having an under-prepared faculty, the school lacked critical instructional resources: no internet access, and no access to the district adopted reading program.

Shortly after the opening of school, the Vanguard Foundation and the Algebra Project became aware of the Marshall School dilemma. The Vanguard Public Foundation is a non-profit organization that is involved in social issues across the country, and the Algebra Project another non-profit, provides technical assistance to teachers in teaching algebra. The Vanguard Foundation and the Algebra Project have worked collaboratively in New Orleans post-Katrina since October 2005. Their mission has been to provide quality educational environments to several schools, both charter and non-charter schools in the RSD and the New Orleans Public Schools. The Vanguard/Algebra Project Group is led by a cadre of local and national representatives and actor and humanitarian Danny Glover. They immediately got involved and asked RSD to return the Marshall students to their building. RSD instead moved Marshall to another temporary site in an unused Catholic school in November 2007. While the Catholic school was better than the Holy Cross site, Marshall students, faculty and staff still had no access to the internet or a library. RSD stated that Marshall could return to the original school site in January 2008 at the end of the first semester. However, in early in January, RSD informed the principal that they would not be moved back to their buildings because "*the charters did not want to move in the middle of the year.*"

The Vanguard/Algebra Project Group continued to meet with Superintendent Vallas about returning Marshall to their building. Finally after numerous meetings in May 2008, Vallas agreed to allow Marshall to return to its building and agreed to work *collaboratively* with the Vanguard/Algebra Project in returning Marshall Middle School to its pre- Katrina status as the best public middle school in New Orleans.

The Vanguard/Algebra Project Group immediately began working with the faculty and community in getting the school ready for opening day. They garnered local support from the business community and Dillard University, who to date has donated over \$200,000 in goods and services, including extensive tutoring support from Dillard students.

As the school year approached, it was revealed that Marshall would only have access to the third floor of the building while the UNO charter school would occupy the first and second floor. RSD's pledge to return Marshall School to its pre-Katrina status did not materialize. RSD ignored practically all of the school's requests for maintenance assistance with heating, cooling, and sewage systems; the school operated for months with no telephones. Again the students had no library facility. Girls had no place to dress out for physical education. Computers were not properly configured for staff use. Critical textbooks and science materials did not arrive until November three months after the school started. The principal continued to be denied authority in hiring his staff. After a math teacher resigned in October 2008, the principal recruited a certified math teacher as a replacement. In meetings with parents and community leaders the principal stated that RSD refused to hire the recruited certified math teacher and instead sent a journalism teacher not certified in math.

Each RSD school is supposed to be staffed with a *full time* instructional support staff person. This staff person is critical in assisting the teachers in staff development,

providing support for teachers experiencing problems, and coordinating all the LEAP and standardized testing. After Marshall's instructional staff person was transferred in November to another school, the principal found a qualified replacement by December. RSD refused to hire the person. After numerous requests from the principal and Vanguard/Algebra Project, RSD finally agreed to fund the position *part-time three months after the loss of the original staff person*.

This year RSD is only staffing schools with an assistant principal when enrollment reaches 300 students. Given the characteristics of early adolescence, there is a critical need for additional staff persons to address the needs of these students. In addition to being the only middle school in the RSD, Marshall has admitted a large number of students who are overage by one or two grades (15 yrs. old in the 7th grade) and/or expelled from other schools. After initially agreeing to provide an assistant principal to Marshall, RSD decided not to do so and stated that they would adhere to their 300 student enrollment rule regardless of the needs of the student population (Vanguard/Algebra Project 2008). Every middle school and high school in the state of Louisiana and most parts of the country is staffed with at least one assistant principal.

Parents, community members and the Vanguard/Algebra Project staff have been meeting since the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year to address the problems at Marshall School and have repeatedly asked for help. Finally in November 2008, RSD agreed to participate in the December meeting with the working group of parents and community members in solving Marshall's problems.

At its December 2008 meeting, Louella Givens, a member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), heard the concerns of parents. She, too, was shocked at the lack of support from RSD to Marshall School. In that meeting it was revealed that, a week earlier, the University of New Orleans (UNO) was granted a charter (by the BESE board) in the name of Thurgood Marshall Charter High School (Times Picayune, 2008). Mrs. Givens stated that she and other BESE board members were unaware of the situation in the Marshall building when the UNO application came before them. She stated that UNO did not present their proposal as Thurgood Marshall High School, but instead as an extension of their existing elementary and middle school charters. BESE's actions effectively granted to UNO's charter high school the Marshall building (formerly under the name of P.A. Capdau Early College High School). It then became apparent to parents and everyone else at the meeting that the move to take the building from Marshall Middle School and give it to UNO was a well conceived and deliberate plan from the very beginning by RSD and UNO.

In January 2009, RSD officials approached the Vanguard/Algebra Project Group stating that they were going to close Marshall and that they wanted the Algebra Project to work with UNO. The Vanguard/Algebra Project Group was puzzled because their collaborative relationship with RSD was intended to return Marshall Middle School to its pre Hurricane Katrina status. Thus RSD's decision to close Marshall Middle School violates the conditions upon which Vanguard/Algebra Project Group, Dillard University

and other community groups relied when donating hundreds of thousands of dollars in goods and services to the success of the school.

On Wednesday March 4, 2009 the Marshall School principal, Ron Ayler, met with Superintendent Vallas and several RSD officials and was informed of the closure of Marshall Middle School. He was also informed that within 10 days, Superintendent Vallas would meet the parents and teachers to explain the reason for closing the school. On Friday of that week, March 6, 2008, the RSD sent a letter from Superintendent Vallas (unsigned) to parents stating that the school was closing at the end of the year. On the next day, March 7, 2009, an article appeared in the Times Picayune announcing Marshall's closure. The meeting between Superintendent Vallas and the parents never occurred.

After Hurricane Katrina, no one from RSD has notified or explained anything to the Marshall Middle School's parents, teachers or community about any of its actions—from the bussing of the Marshall students to the Lower Ninth Ward on the first day of school in 2007, to the subsequent announcement of closing the school in 2009. Neither has RSD explained to the Vanguard/Algebra Project Group and its collaborative community partners its reason for announcing the closing of Marshall Middle School after agreeing to work with them in returning Marshall to its pre Hurricane Katrina status.

Conclusion

The Marshall Middle School story is an example of RSD's lack of support to non-charter schools by RSD. Marshall Middle School is just one example of a non-charter school that has been removed from its building for newly formed charter schools (Another example is Sylvania Williams Elementary School). In the case of Marshall, RSD completely ignored and disrespected the parents and their school communities by not responding to their numerous calls for assistance.

The Marshall Middle School story calls into question the RSD's mission in New Orleans. One would think that given its mission to improve schools, it would at least make every effort to replicate the academic achievement that occurred at Marshall before the Hurricane Katrina. Instead, the RSD has made a very concerted effort to destroy the school and give the building to a charter operator, who has not demonstrated success at Marshall Middle School.

RSD's action at Marshall clearly demonstrates its favoritism toward charters—regardless of the circumstances of success, of the consequences for students, or of parent and community support.

The current state of affairs regarding public education in New Orleans calls into question the stated reason for the state- take over, allegedly to improved academic achievement. RSD's current record demonstrates that academic achievement has not improved. RSD's claim to improve the schools and create superior learning environments has not materialized.

It is imperative that state and local policymakers immediately "*rethink*" the current direction of public education in New Orleans and Louisiana. While the RSD applauds its progress, a cursory and in depth examination often tells a story that is just the opposite.

This rethinking must address all aspects of the state take over, including, but not limited to: governance, transparency, academic accountability, financial accountability, the conversion to a total charter school district, and equity and access issues for all students.