

Disaster Upon Disaster  
Special Education in Post Katrina Public Schools  
By  
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When the levees broke in our beloved New Orleans, the Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center that we spent our adult lives building was swept away in torrents of swamp water and mud. Our emotions ran wild – shock, anger, frustration, grief and despair. Now, more than a year later, we continue to grapple with the complex afterworld of devastation. Piles of debris from destroyed homes and businesses line our streets, and more than half of our schools and hospitals remain closed. Nearly half of our citizenry have not returned for lack of affordable housing and city services, and our elderly are dying in unfamiliar places at unprecedented rates.

The plight of public education can be seen as having less urgency than the concerns that immediately sustain life. However, what we decide about public education in New Orleans will probably have the longest lasting impact on the future of public schools across the nation. Moreover, without the protections guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the right of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment is in serious jeopardy. Unbelievably, children who have endured some of the worst losses of their young lives, have survived only to find that they have been excluded from the schools that are often as important to them as their homes.

When evacuees attempted to return to New Orleans after the storm, they soon discovered that the public school system had been reconfigured into a conundrum of charter schools and six schools operated by the Orleans Parish School Board, in which they were no longer welcome, and a Recovery Schools District that is comprised of all schools rated as academically unacceptable by the state of Louisiana. It was the continuation of a bad situation that was brewing before Katrina. The Orleans Parish School District had become a system where some students succeeded, but where the majority were trapped in schools that the state rated as academically unacceptable or failing schools.

We say students were trapped in failing schools because while the selective admissions public schools were pushing to expand, there was no movement to include children who could not meet their strict admission requirements. In the resulting controversy, school changed almost yearly. Students in low performing schools often went without qualified permanent teachers, textbooks and supplies, and their parents were angry and frustrated over the total mismanagement of the system. In the end, three representatives introduced legislation that allowed for a state takeover of the schools.

On September 30, 2005, Secretary Spellings announced a U.S. Department of Education grant in the amount of 20.9 million dollars to Louisiana to be used for the establishment of charter schools. Shortly thereafter, she allocated another 25 million dollars solely for

that purpose. The arrival of those funds sparked a hasty proliferation of charter schools. In the months after the storm, 33 charter schools have opened. As a result, many public school students are educated in settings that are increasingly segregated by race, class, and ability. Many charter schools have selective admissions requirements which virtually prohibit students who were in failing schools and those with disabilities from gaining admission. Although charters are mandated to comply with the IDEA, the entrance criteria matrix effectively screens out students with cognitive disabilities. Further, students with physical disabilities may also be excluded because of the lack of accessibility of many of the charter schools' facilities. Additionally, the supports and services that allow children with special needs to achieve success and remain in school are often not available. Evaluations, I.E.P.'s and procedural safeguards are sometimes postponed indefinitely. Sadly, inclusion, a fundamental principle of the IDEA, often implemented without training in the Recovery School District, can actually lead to the exclusion of children who need support to remain in school.

Thus, while millions of federal dollars are being directed to charter schools that are eligible to receive as much as \$2000 per student, the public school system is not seeing that kind of cash flow. At a time when there are shortages of teachers, books and supplies, when there are few extra curricular activities, and few accessible physical plants, the state run Recovery School District decided to spend money opening an alternative school for eight students. The school rules reveal a prison –like setting where students may not speak, hands must remain behind their backs, restroom breaks can only be taken twice daily at specified times, and students must remain at arm's length from one another at all times. Our experience tells us that this school will soon be filled with students who have behavioral needs.. In fact, there are already children with disabilities who have been placed there without the benefit of manifestation determination hearings.

As surely as Louisiana's coastline erodes with each storm surge, the disability movement is at risk of losing ground with every disaster anywhere. We must plan now to provide continuity of services to children with disabilities in our public schools. Moreover, if we intend to actualize our vision of moving forward together, we will have to rely on each other when our principles are threatened.. Disaster must never become an excuse for further disaster.

#### A CALL TO ACTION

(Specific responses to be determined.)

### *A Personal Note*

This continues to be a period of recovery for all citizens in the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area. However, it has been particularly difficult for families of children of color and all children with disabilities who lived in the hardest hit sections of the city – the low lying ,traditionally underserved communities inhabited by low income working families and the poor. These are the families that have filled our workshops, training, and one-to-one rolls for nearly sixteen years. These are the families who have become advocates and leaders in over 100 public schools in New Orleans. These are the families that have been disproportionately displaced after the storm.

As survivors of Hurricane Katrina, we and our staff who live and work in the same community have experienced this kind of disconnection and isolation, first hand.

Just days before the storm, the Pyramid staff met at the historic Gulfside Assembly Retreat Center in Waveland, Mississippi to plan and schedule our events and activities for the 2005-06 school year. The meeting was an intense three-day gathering during which we strategized around ways to involve greater numbers of professionals to train and interact with parents from our community. We had achieved a modicum of success as nearly 25% of all attendees in our Saturday trainings identified themselves as teachers, classroom aides and/or social workers. We knew that we would need more reliable allies in assuring that our children would benefit from FAPE because our public schools were in serious trouble.

The Orleans Parish School District, our local education agency was in a downward spiral as a result of the dismissal of yet another superintendent, formal charges of fiscal mismanagement, infighting among board members, disheartened teachers, angry parents, and failed schools. Thus, the school year ended with talk of takeover by the State of Louisiana. Just what the state's plan was for the Orleans Parish School District and it's 78000 students was unclear. As the opening of school neared, the anxiety level rose over what would be the fate of New Orleans' 128 public schools and then Katrina hit.

As you well know, there have been significant barriers to business as usual in New Orleans. Our first instinct after the disaster was to solicit funds from the USDE for reconstruction of our offices. At that time we realized that we had lost most of our personal and professional possessions; however, we had not yet comprehended the full implications and extent of these losses .During the past sixteen years we have been busy developing and directing Pyramid Parent Training which became the Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center. This involved finding funding, educating and supporting parents, consulting with researchers, and building collaborative partnerships. These have all been integral parts of meeting the needs of underserved parents of children with disabilities in the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area. Indeed, Pyramid had become a stable, enduring resource for families, advocates, and educators in our community and beyond.

Upon our return to the city, we were deeply shocked and saddened by the extent of the devastation. Nothing seemed familiar in the rubble, silence, and stench that replaced what was once home. Media descriptions of New Orleans as a 'Ghost Town' were painfully accurate. Perhaps the most painful experience was walking through the Pyramid office after it had been gutted by city workers. Nothing remained of the welcoming, learning and support space we had created. When the cleanup crew saw us,

they exited respectfully and let us walk through the building alone, as if allowing us to view the body of a loved one for the last time.

Resurrecting Pyramid as we knew and loved it, is going to require more resources than are available to us . Here is a list of storm related expenses and losses.

- Affordable rent \$ 1000 per month for higher cost of rent and utilities
- 3 Six ft. round tables
- Copy machine
- 50 stackable chairs
- 5 office desks and chairs
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- Office supplies
- 3 computers
- 2 printers
- 4 locking file cabinets
- Telephone system
- Playspace toys and books
- Library of books on disability and learning
- 4 bookcases

Thanks for anything you can contribute.

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