



New Orleans Children Being Denied a Public Education

By: Advancement Project and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (February 2006)

Countless words have been written and scores of photographs shot in the five months since Hurricane Katrina swamped New Orleans, but it is the numbers that reveal the unimaginable scope of the destruction left behind and the work left to be done. Schools are not immune to the post-Katrina fallout either. Pre-Katrina, 122 public schools were open in Orleans Parish. A report released Jan. 17 by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission's Education Committee said just 17 of those schools have reopened. In November, the Louisiana legislature voted to place 102 low-performing public schools in a state-run "recovery district," leaving only 15 under district control. Since Katrina, eight of those 15 schools have been chartered while four were deemed too severely damaged by the hurricane to reopen this school year.

Algiers Charter School, Audubon Charter School, and Lusher Charter School are refusing to admit students who do not "meet" the schools requirements even though there is room to accommodate additional children. Also, other Orleans Parish public schools are placing hundreds of students on a "waiting list," stating that schools currently open are filled to capacity. All of the abovementioned entities are public funded and each has an obligation to educate the children of Orleans Parish.

Schools can open in Orleans Parish. Arthur Ashe School and Edgar B. Harny Elementary School sustained little damage after Katrina and could open within one week after the storm. However, the State of Louisiana not only will not allow the Orleans Parish School Board to open these schools, but Dr. Cecil Picard and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education—which governs the State Department of Education—have refused to open them. As a result, the children of New Orleans—primarily children of color—are left with no ability to receive an education.

In addition, according to the state's school attendance laws, a child between the ages of seven and 18 must attend school unless s/he graduates from high school before her/his 18th birthday, is attending or seeking admission to a National Guard Youth Challenge Program in the state, or has secured written consent to withdraw from school prior to graduation. By failing and steadfastly refusing to allow these children to attend school, school officials are putting these students' parents in jeopardy of being charged criminally, when in fact the crime is being committed by the School Board, the Louisiana Department of Education, and the charter schools. Moreover, officers may stop juveniles whom they reasonably believe are in violation of the truancy law. Now, innocent children, who want nothing more than to attend school, are subject to being stopped by police officers in New Orleans because, through no fault of their own, they are not in



school. On January 27, 2006 a class action lawsuit was filed against the Orleans Parish School Board, Louisiana Department of Education, Algiers Charter Schools Association, Audubon Charter School, and Lusher Charter Schools Association on behalf of parents being denied the right to educate their children in public schools in New Orleans, as guaranteed by the Louisiana Constitutions. The plaintiffs seek the immediate enrollment of their children in open public schools in New Orleans/Orleans Parish that have denied enrollment to school age children, and the opening of a sufficient number of elementary schools in Orleans Parish.

It is illegal to turn away school age children from any public school with the physical capacity to enroll additional students.

Louisiana officials want people to return to New Orleans. The one thing that will bring people back to their communities is if they know there's a good school for their children to attend and there's safe places for them to play. The health and vitality of American democracy depends upon a strong system of public education.

The lurid images of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina have taught us many lessons about this country. In the days, weeks, and months following the storm, we must come to terms with the fact that race still matters.

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Advancement Project's core purpose is to develop, encourage, pioneer and widely disseminate innovative ideas and models that inspire and mobilize a broad national racial justice movement so that universal opportunity and a just democracy are achieved. The organization was founded on the principle that structural racism can be eliminated and a racially just democracy may be attained through multi-racial collective action by organized communities. Advancement Project's founding team of veteran civil rights lawyers and communications experts have established an organization that informs community organizing with careful legal analysis and strategic communications campaigns. We develop community-based solutions based on the same high quality legal analysis and public education campaigns that produced the landmark civil rights victories of earlier eras. www.advancementproject.org.

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition (PHRF) is working to build a People's movement – a movement of grassroots persons disproportionately impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the dehumanizing treatment they received from local, state, and federal officials. The goals of PHRF include building and maintaining a coordinated network of community leaders, organizers and community based organizations with the capacity and organizational infrastructure that can help meet the needs of people most impacted by Katrina and government neglect; facilitating an organizing process that will demand local, grassroots leadership with national and international support, foster people of color leadership, particularly black leadership, with the support of a multi-racial alliance, placing special emphasis on the involvement of women, people of color, poor, gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender populations, immigrants, indigenous, youth, and people with disabilities in the relief, return, and reconstruction process in New Orleans. http://cluonline.live.radicaldesigns.org/?page_id=2.