



Hurricane flooded lawmakers with some common sense

By Jim Waters

Opponents of school choice want you to believe that allowing parents to remove their children from failing schools benefits only angry, white right-wingers intent on destroying public education.

Unfortunately, perception often trumps reality. But things are changing.

In New Orleans, for example, it took a hurricane, but parents now acknowledge the reality that the city's embarrassing public schools have consistently left their children behind.

In 2004, 75 percent of the city's eighth-graders scored "below basic" in reading; two-thirds fell "below basic" in math. Enrollment declined 25 percent between 1998 and 2005 as more and more parents realized schools weren't getting the job done.

Then came Hurricane Katrina.

The storm's damage – out of necessity – resulted in a large expansion of the city's fledgling charter-school program. It was also the beginning of a movement toward vouchers for needy families.

People who remained behind after the storm needed somewhere for their children to attend school, and quickly. Not only had the district's administration been corrupt, it also was highly inept, having failed to even properly insure school buildings, leaving water-logged facilities in ruins after the storm.

Many parents, including a significant group of minorities, wanted to provide their children with a better income but couldn't afford private schools. The answer to their dilemma: charter schools, publicly funded schools run the right way.

Students without neighborhood schools destroyed by the storm wouldn't miss a year of school after all. Charter schools rebuilt faster than public schools and spread quicker than the waters of Hurricane Katrina after the levees broke. The city now features one of the most expansive charter-school programs in the country.

While Plato gets credit for observing that "necessity is the mother of invention," black lawmakers such as Sen. Ann Duplessis and Rep. Austin Badon, who both represent New Orleans, get acclaim for the courage to stand up in the aftermath of a hurricane's destruction, and announce that they would no longer accept substandard education for students, especially minorities who have, for too long, been left behind by the Crescent City school system.

They expressed unwavering support for charter schools. They also took on the unions and succeeded in passing a \$10-million voucher program allowing 1,500 children from lower-income homes to enroll in private schools. Hundreds of parents lined up last week to apply.

"Although they're moving into this very cautiously, I believe people are now beginning to see the value of not protecting systems but protecting children," Duplessis said during a recent interview on Louisville's black radio station WLLV-AM. Protecting children and their future by ensuring access to a good education rather than propping up "the system" represents good work, senator. You get an "A."

Meanwhile, as parents waited in line to sign up for vouchers in New Orleans, the teachers' union in Jefferson County, Ky., went to court to challenge a decision by Superintendent Sheldon Berman not to renew contracts of 18 non-tenured teachers for next year. Berman charged that one high-school teacher, who didn't meet any of her 10 teaching standards last year, also failed to supervise her students, allowing them to throw a trash can and scissors out a classroom window and staged pretend fights.

The union's attorney told the Courier-Journal "This is about the policies that are designed to help teachers become the best they can be."

Too bad the lawyer and the union he represents doesn't seem nearly as concerned about ensuring that the teachers would help students become the best they can be in a district where 19,820 out of 33,809 – 59 percent – of black students tested "below proficient" readers in 2006.

That's not just a perception – for real.

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