

**Greater New Orleans Education  
Foundation**

*A Commitment to Rebuilding  
a Better New Orleans*



**Authored by Collaborative Communications Group**

**Funded by Public Education Network**



**Public Education Network (PEN)** is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 82 LEF members work in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1,600 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education.

**The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation** is dedicated to assuring an effective and quality education for every child in the five-parish region of New Orleans. The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization of business, educational, civic, and political leaders, created in March 1998 in response to the city's issues relative to reforming its failing public schools.

**Collaborative Communications Group** is a communications consulting practice that forms partnerships with national foundations, the public sector, nonprofit education and community-based organizations and school districts to create initiatives, distinctive products and sustainable solutions that can improve the performance of groups serving public education.

**Introduction**

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation (GNOEF) participated in Public Education Network's Gulf States Initiative, which was designed to enlarge the role of the public in school improvement in the Gulf States region. Public Education Network (PEN) is a network of local education funds (LEFs) across the nation. In PEN's view, "public responsibility" will not emerge from conventional, smaller-scale efforts to involve parents more closely with their children's schools or to inform the community about a superintendent's program. Instead, PEN initiatives take as their premise that in a democracy, public schools can only improve in a sustainable way if a broad-based coalition of community members pushes them to improve and holds them accountable. The Gulf States Initiative charged six LEFs, including GNOEF, with moving their communities toward different and more substantial forms of responsibility for their schools.

Wendy Puriefoy, PEN's president, has said, "Without citizen mobilization, reform and continuous improvement in public education cannot occur." She connects this mobilization to broad civic purposes: "The ultimate aim of citizen mobilization in the context of school reform is to reshape the relationships people have with one another, with their community, their neighborhood, their state, and their country."

The hard work by GNOEF and the entire community has constituted a process of widespread public engagement that will carry on in New Orleans beyond the initiative.

**Accomplishments of the New Orleans Gulf States Initiative:**

- Citywide assessment of the system of public schools in New Orleans, including an evaluation of the Recovery School District (RSD), Orleans Parish School District, and charter schools
- A key component of the assessment was extensive community engagement that gathered input from more than 3,000 parents, teachers and students from all 58 schools
- Focus groups with students, community leaders and parents in neighborhoods of Algiers and Treme, involving RSD and non-RSD schools as a measure of the barriers and bridges to equity
- Nexus planning in Algiers and Treme that involves citizen-driven planning for community rebuilding

## Two Years After the Storm

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To much of the country, New Orleans may seem as if it is back to normal. But that is not so for those who live in New Orleans.

The TV crews have mostly left, occasionally returning for news events like John Edwards' announcement of his candidacy for president, which he did from the Ninth Ward. Another candidate, Barak Obama, got attention recently by urging CNN's Anderson Cooper to continue to highlight the city's evolving story. Otherwise, media attention has subsided, and the country's concern has moved on to other things.

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Tourists have started to come back, but only partially. Frank Williams, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation (GNOEF), estimates that hotel, restaurant, convention and other tourist business—the lifeblood of New Orleans—is at about 60 percent of its pre-Katrina levels. Real estate prices are soaring in the city's French Quarter, where those who can afford to live there do so in part because the neighborhood is the highest spot in the city, and thus stayed dry when more than 80 percent of the city was under water. The rest of the city has fared less well.

Nearly two years after the storm, thousands of houses in the Ninth Ward remain devastated and uninhabited. Only a tiny number of homes have been rebuilt. To rebuild requires diligence from people who will receive little or no insurance, federal help or state resources to come back. And even when these rebuilt homes get running water and electricity, services that other neighborhoods have had restored—such as trash pickup, postal service, neighborhood grocery stores and gas stations—are still unavailable.

City maps drawn before Katrina and those drawn since look entirely different. Six months from now, they will look different still, because of constantly changing rates of population return to neighborhoods and risks of future flooding.

### **Rebuilding the Schools**

The schools in New Orleans also are different from what they were pre-Katrina. Some say the change is hopeful; others say that what was arguably the worst school system in the nation has gotten even worse. Perhaps the biggest problem is facilities. New Orleans has too few schools to support the number of students who need schools. The state has promised certain monies to reopen schools by August 2007, and is partnering with FEMA, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP), the

Louisiana Recovery Authority, the Office of Community Development, the Louisiana National Guard and New Orleans Public Schools.

People who fled the city have said they will not return without the basic conditions of housing, safety, services and good schools. Many people who left for Houston or Baton Rouge have found conditions better in those places. Others, although unhappy in their new cities and missing home, are still not willing to move back until conditions improve.

In the midst of this, some people say that education can provide a silver lining for New Orleans after Katrina. They say that if new schools are built, and a school system is created from the ground up that can provide equity for students in every ward, then the city can become a national model for possibility and reform. Others say that such an opportunity has yet to be seized, and if it isn't soon, the system's failure will signal a death knell for the entire community.

An article in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* in February called the district "one of the nation's most dysfunctional school systems in the wake of one of the worst disasters in the nation's history." In focus groups funded by GNOEF, students themselves said they feel enormous anxiety—not just because of the quandary of whether they will have adequate, if any, school facilities, but also because they live in fear of gang violence and a growing rodent population.

The district also is plagued by busing problems and fluctuating enrollment. According to the school district, about 900 new students registered for classes in March and April alone, and the number of students is expected to grow to 40,000 next year. The state has turned to the National Guard for help renovating hurricane-damaged schools that will be needed to accommodate students returning to the district.

Much of the hope for a turnaround falls to the new schools superintendent and the state superintendent—or, "the two Pauls," as locals refer to them—Paul Vallas and Paul Pastorek. Both have reputations as clean-up artists.

Vallas, the schools CEO, has had vast experience reforming the intractable big-city systems of Chicago and Philadelphia. Vallas most recently left a school system of about 200,000 students—the size of the entire current population of the city of New Orleans. As head of the Recovery School District (RSD), Vallas will oversee about 40 schools and 27,000 students of the 58 public schools open in the city. The Recovery School

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District was created in 2003 by the Louisiana Department of Education to allow the state to take over failing schools, those that fell into a certain “worst performing” metric.

Paul Pastorek worked for NASA in the aftermath of the 2003 shuttle Columbia disaster and gave up his work as an attorney to become the Louisiana’s Education Superintendent in March 2007. Until taking that position, Pastorek served on the board of GNOEF.

### **Greater New Orleans Education Foundation and *The State of Public Education in New Orleans***

The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization of business, educational, civic and political leaders. The organization was created in 1998, in response to the city’s failure to reform its public schools. Through Public Education Network’s Gulf States Initiative, GNOEF has worked with the city and various nonprofit organizations to convene and engage citizens in identifying and creating strategies to rebuild the city.

To support the recovery and reform of the public education system, GNOEF, New Orleans City Council, and Tulane University’s Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives recently concluded a citywide assessment called *The State of Public Education in New Orleans*. This included an evaluation of all of the city’s public schools—those in the Recovery School District, the Orleans Parish School District, and charter schools.

A key component of the assessment was an extensive community engagement effort that gathered input from over 3,000 parents, teachers and students from all 58 public schools in New Orleans. Opinions were gathered through a community survey, discussions with 25 schools and community groups, and meetings and interviews with local and national education leaders. The final report, released June 11, examined the structural, operational and academic changes that have occurred within the public schools since Hurricane Katrina.

While providing a baseline of information about how the current system is doing, the report also outlines recommendations to support transformation efforts over the next two to three years, with the assumption that during this period the system’s structure will remain largely unchanged.

A summary of the six recommendations:

- 1. Ensure adequate capacity for the 2007–08 year.** The reports suggests that the Recovery School District, which is responsible for opening and operating most of the city’s schools, should create a team that will devise a plan to ensure enough schools are ready to open in August.
- 2. Equip and empower all families to choose the best public schools for**

**their children from a range of high-quality school options.** At present, families are given little information that they can access or understand about what their options are and how they can overcome existing barriers to enrollment.

- 3. Strengthen the Recovery School District.** The report calls for a 100-day turnaround plan to improve RSD operations. The report suggests that the RSD governing board create a process to return schools to local control. The report also recommends the RSD evaluate ways to engage the community, create school networks, and build expertise of school administrators and teachers.
- 4. Attract, develop and retain high-quality school principals, teachers and staff for all public schools.** The report calls for innovation in recruitment and retention of high-quality principals, teachers and school staff. It also suggests that schools expand professional development opportunities to support effective classroom instruction.
- 5. Support school- and system-level excellence for all public schools.** The report suggests that New Orleans needs one or more organizations that focus exclusively on supporting initiatives that benefit all public schools. Responsibilities would include securing and marshaling resources, facilitating collaboration, and building local and national relationships to support school transformation.
- 6. Create and endorse a short-term action plan and a long-term strategic plan for public education.** The report says that education and community leaders should create a short-term action plan to prioritize key systemwide initiatives that require immediate action. In addition, a long-term plan for public education, which includes input from the community and builds on previous planning processes should be created, widely endorsed and communicated.

### **Concordia and The Nexus Model: Integrated, Collaborative Rebuilding of Communities and Schools**

Concordia, a community-planning and architecture firm based in New Orleans, is using its “nexus” concept to rebuild two of the city’s communities—Algiers and Treme. This work is sponsored by GNOEF.

An integrated nexus planning framework comprises six elements:

- Physical—urban design, facilities planning and telecommunications infrastructure
- Cultural—visual, performing, culinary disciplines as well as ethnic and faith-based initiatives
- Social—health, housing and human service programs
- Economic—financial, environmental and human-resource-sustaining programs and resources
- Organizational—governmental reorganization and other leadership issues

## The Nexus Planning Model

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- Educational—lifelong learning programs from pre-kindergarten to workforce

While each element has individual significance, the integrated planning model focuses on the interface, or “nexus,” at which these disciplines overlap and reinforce each other.

Through nexus-based planning, for example, the same public recreational spaces can serve both youth and adult recreational programs at different times of the day. The same could be true for schools, libraries, museums and gymnasiums. School auditoriums can double as community performing arts centers and other joint-use facilities. The result is a more robust system of broad-based community programming that can be achieved at lower capital and operational costs.

Concordia materials state that “after Katrina and Rita, the need for a more collaborative approach to planning was essential to regaining public trust and confidence and to keeping people engaged in the improvement of their neighborhoods, rather than feeling despair.”

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According to Bobbie Hill, partner and director of planning at Concordia, Gulf States Initiative funding supported the development of the community center collaboration, a network of 30 programmatic and service providers such as the United Way, the Louisiana Public Health Institute and faith-based groups. Concordia’s nexus concept states that building a network of providers encourages people to stay in neighborhoods and to connect with clients and communities. “As neighborhoods are redeveloped, it will be important to have services in an area that is walk-able to people in the community,” Hill says.

Hill provided coordination and oversight services for citywide and district-level planning processes of the recently completed Unified New Orleans Planning project. The outcome of the project’s aggressive five-month schedule was a citywide plan for recovery presented to the New Orleans City Planning Commission for review. In addition, the project created 13 district-level plans intended to help guide redevelopment and funding decisions for the rebuilding of New Orleans.

“We’ve been working with Frank [Williams]—he’s been at it since pre-Katrina—to determine what role schools can play in revitalizing communities. Pre-Katrina, it was a broken system; we’re now trying to rebuild something better,” Hill says.



## The Treme Community of New Orleans

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school. The charter association has its own board—a system within a system,” he says.

“We had been questioning our own work because we saw a crack in our existing model of schools as the center of community—mainly around governance,” Bingler explains. “That model swamped the principal boat. Principals were taking time from student achievement to be community collaborators. So we started looking at a new model, one that was not school-centered but urban-design-centered with a collaborative governance model. Katrina set us up, in a way. Now we have a city that needs to be rebuilt, and we started immediately with this project.”

### **The Treme Community**

This spring, GNOEF contracted with Concordia and the Historic Faubourg Treme Association and Esplanade Ridge and Treme Civic Association to develop a Community Integrated Schools Plan for Treme. The plan provides an opportunity for parents, students, educators and the Treme community to create strategies and programs that will maximize the use of school and community facilities in the neighborhood.

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New Orleans is a city of distinctive neighborhoods, each with its own personality and community-based cultural traditions that reflect the history and spirit of the people who live there. Built by Haitian immigrants, Treme

embraces a particularly rich cultural heritage. Congo Square, in the middle of neighborhood, is largely regarded as the birthplace of jazz, and the neighborhood’s old red-light district is the birthplace of ragtime, dating back to the days when slaves would gather to play music, sing and dance. The Craig Elementary School, near Congo Square, served a number of children who later became famous musicians. Louis Armstrong toted his trumpet to school there and, years later, Trombone Shorty was often heard blowing his horn on the sidewalks as he walked home in the afternoon.

Getting schools open is a primary concern, but Hilda Young, a school board member and New Orleans gadfly, says, “It’s not just about opening schools, but making these quality

schools. These schools are still substandard. They don't provide children with education for the 21st century."

Nayja Barnam, who met her husband through their interests in preservation of houses in the neighborhood, said that even before Concordia started its work, schools were trying to bring together neighborhood resources. "A community-focused school has so much to offer," she says. "It's educational in itself and gives a child a sense of belonging and knowing. Schools are core to our growth because of the relationships it builds for children. We can't do it without connecting with children and teachers."

She adds, "The work in Treme is focused on saving architecture, history and culture as we also work to fight crime, grime and blight."

### **Sustaining the Commitment**

Steering his Prius through Algiers, Bingler talks about how people are creating their own destiny through engagement in the nexus planning in Districts 12 and 13. He calls it nothing short of "a democratic revolution"—a refrain he repeats again and again over a two-day visit. On the way to a community center collaboration meeting, when asked what made him confident that such a revolution is authentic, Bingler responded, bright-eyed in the rearview mirror: "Because I can feel it!"

In the meeting, a number of people tell stories of how citizens, fed up with inaction or misdirection from political and civic leaders, have taken up the yoke and started to carry it themselves, becoming more empowered as they do so. "It all boils down to America and what's happened to our democracy," says a school-based health representative. When she adds that "people need to participate to make their world relevant and responsive to what their needs are," several people at the table nod, and a chorus of others chant, "absolutely, absolutely."

Others say that as valuable as the planning has been, 20 months of talk needs to move quickly to action. A retired general contractor says, "Let's stop planning. We need a central coordinating position."

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### **Looking Forward**

"The story of New Orleans is far from over," says Frank Williams as he drives through the Ninth Ward and glances at house after abandoned house. "We need to keep telling it. The

## Looking Forward

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engagement we've done is so important. But we need to keep it going, not just for a year or two but for the next five to 10 years."

Williams cites the need to build an infrastructure within organizations and neighborhoods to sustain the conversation about schools and the community nexus planning. And, in order to move to action, Williams says that ongoing needs for capacity-building must be met, more in some neighborhoods than others.

Focus group data and the community assessment of the schools both plead for ongoing dialogue, particularly between state and school system officials and people in the community.

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There is recognition that this work depends on outside funding sources, but all participants know that future levels of funding are uncertain.

City Council member Cynthia Hedge-Morrell says, "The work that remains to be done is so big and it's going to take money. Funding groups are going to have to get out of their safety net what they fund. They want tangible outcomes that they can measure. We will have that, but at

some point two to three years down the line. In the meantime, we need to keep going to get to those outcomes."

In June 2007, New Orleans school officials announced that Concordia will help the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board develop the School Facilities Master Plan, slated for completion in the spring. Concordia will develop standards for school facilities, anticipate future enrollment and capacity needs, and evaluate existing facilities. The master plan will incorporate the recommendations of the Unified New Orleans Plan, stronger building requirements from the Louisiana Recovery Authority and new flood elevation standards. Concordia must also hold community engagement workshops throughout the planning process. ("Firms drafting blueprint for N.O. public schools construction," *New Orleans City Business*, June 25, 2007)

Concordia's Steve Bingler said, "We are delighted to have this really important opportunity to build on all of the planning that has taken place in the city and moving that planning to a higher level of implementation with schools at the center of neighborhoods and with the opportunity to rebuild our education infrastructure in a way that supports 21st century best practices, teaching and learning. This team believes that the development of the School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish must be deeply owned by the residents of New Orleans, whether they have returned to the city or are trying to make their way back home."

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Concordia will schedule a series of community forums in the city's 13 planning districts, create a website to document the project, share weekly and monthly progress reports, and support ongoing community participation in the project. Concordia will also assemble a community advisory board and conduct citywide meetings facilitated by AmericaSpeaks.

Superintendent Paul Pastorek stated, "I feel confident that the children and the residents of Orleans Parish are going to get the kind of school system we have all dreamed about. The community involvement will be key to making this process work, and I encourage everyone who wants to make the public education system in New Orleans better than it has ever been to get involved." Pastorek said he would be embarking on a series of community meetings seeking input on short-term plans that would include the RSD's facility needs for the coming year.

In addition to addressing the vast facilities issue, state and city officials needed to hire an estimated 400 teachers before fall. There is good news here too. Paul Vallas recently stated, "Fortunately, we exceeded our goals and will be staffing at 120 percent to ensure that we can keep our class sizes reduced to no more than 20-1 in grades K-8 and no more than 25-1. Thus, these reduced class sizes will be real." (Education Week chat, August 20, 2007)

## PEN's Theory of Action

The national office of PEN issued a broad and ambitious charge to LEFs by developing a theory of action for the policy initiatives in 2001. The theory of action asserted that the combination of public engagement and specific school reform goals would result in sustained policy and practice and the public taking responsibility for public schools. It argued that too many school systems lack accountability to their local constituencies, and that the reforms undertaken by school professionals or brokered in back rooms without public engagement are likely to be faddish and ephemeral.

The theory of action identified three categories of the public: policymakers; organized groups; and the public at large. For each, it spelled out strategies and tactics by which LEFs cultivate public engagement: advocacy with policymakers; community strategic planning with organized groups; and community organizing with the public at large. The theory of action went on to provide examples of these strategies in action. It ended with a vision of the long-term goal:

...to create public demand for good public schools and to have this demand actually improve public schools. When we're done, we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in student achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools — with its own power and constituency — that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement. And we envision an accountability system that places shared responsibility for success with everyone in the community. (p. 11).



**Purpose Statement:**

The purpose of the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation is to assure an effective and quality education for every child in the five-parish region of New Orleans.

The Greater New Orleans Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization of business, educational, civic, and political leaders, created in March 1998 in response to the city's issues relative to reforming its failing public schools.



**Our Vision**

Every day, in every community, *every* child in America benefits from a quality public education.

**Our Mission**

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.