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'New' New Orleans, 'new' schools

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The people of New Orleans, the residents of Louisiana and the taxpayers of America should think long and hard about how to rebuild the city's schools after the deluge. Maybe before we rebuild these schools, we should rethink what public education in the "new" New Orleans might look like. Perhaps the tragedy of Katrina can be somewhat redeemed by a "new" New Orleans school system that serves as a beacon of reform across America.

Seldom do tragedy and opportunity converge to create such a once-in-a-generation chance for change. Devastated New Orleans can draw a new roadmap to the untapped potential of 21st century public education in America. Given the amount of money, time and the stakes involved, it is time for some hard thinking about the Big Easy's schools.

Before rebuilding, why not rethink? Why not put aside traditional assumptions about buildings and governance and finance and instruction? Why not toss aside 19th and 20th century thinking about the length of the school year, the school day and the character of the classroom? These are all somewhat arbitrary and artificial institutional arrangements from an earlier time. They reflect an emphasis on ordering public education around the needs of the system and the adults who run it. Why not rethink public education and design a system that responds to the needs of its students? It is time to see the distinction between schooling and education. The former embraces the limitations of time, space and circumstance. Education takes place anywhere, anytime and for a lifetime.

There should be a menu of education options for the students in the "new" New Orleans, including the choice to attend traditional schools or charter schools or magnet schools or cyber schools. Perhaps in the "new" New Orleans, how long a student sits at a desk should matter less than how much that student learns. With student-centered, custom-designed curriculum and instruction, each student proceeds at his own pace, and when a subject is mastered he moves on.

Perhaps traditional notions of grades and grading should be set aside in favor of performance-based accountability that recognizes student achievement and rewards it by letting students continue to progress and

achieve. Certainly it is time to stop closing our eyes when students do not achieve by allowing them to move on, almost ensuring they never will. Maybe in the "new" New Orleans, there are no elementary or middle or high schools -- just schools where students and teachers and parents are engaged in learning. Perhaps it is time to send money to families and students rather than buildings and systems, and let parents decide what's best for the children.

The president is quite right to ask Congress to help fund the education of students attending non-public schools. In Louisiana a large proportion of students attend non-public schools. At a deeper level, what should matter is the education a child receives, not where the child receives it. Taxpayer dollars are supposed to underwrite the education of children, not buildings or districts or systems.

Congress should also conduct hearings to explore other obstacles New Orleans and other areas rebuilding face. Lawmakers should shine a bright light on what works and what doesn't, and remove ramparts to reform.

Education in this country is at a crossroads. There is great and important work to be done. America is falling behind other nations, and our students and our country will pay a terrible price for this. Important reforms, such as President Bush's No Child Left Behind, have made somewhat of a difference; primarily by focusing our attention on results and awakening Americans to just how bad things are. But it will take bold, creative and imaginative thinking to produce change. And it will require an opportunity that allows us to get beyond tinkering with the status quo if we are ever to going to provide America's children with the education they deserve and need.

Those of us who cleaned chalkboards know how hard it is to wipe the slate clean. New Orleans has a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do just that for its kids. The Big Easy can show the way to other big cities facing hard choices.

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