

Katrina's Displaced School Children

Bill Number:

Hearing Date: September 22, 2005, 3:00 pm

Location: SD430

Witness:

Daryl Gates

Youree Drive Middle School, Shreveport, Louisiana

Middle School Special Education Teacher

Testimony

TESTIMONY OF DARYL GATES

Middle School Special Education Teacher

Youree Drive Middle School, Shreveport, Louisiana

Caddo Public School District

Good afternoon, Sen. Alexander, Sen. Dodd, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Daryl Gates and for 28 years I have been a public school teacher. I am currently a special education teacher at Youree Drive Middle School in Shreveport, Louisiana, as well as an adjunct professor at Southern University in Shreveport. I am also a member of the National Education Association's IDEA Cadre. We are a 26-member group of practicing educators who provide professional development about IDEA to educators and community members all across the country. In all my years of teaching, one thing remains true: schools and teachers are anchors of stability in children's lives. In the wake of Katrina, stability, normalcy, and a sense of community and belonging are desperately needed.

Since Hurricane Katrina hit, my district has enrolled 1400 displaced students and we've hired many teachers from the New Orleans area. For the most part, these colleagues and students are living in shelters, church shelters, and temporary housing. At my school alone, we have many new students from New Orleans and we have no way of knowing how high that number will climb as families continue to relocate. As of yesterday, my Superintendent was preparing for evacuee students who were in Houston to be re-located to our school district in preparation for Hurricane Rita. Our district is having trouble getting needed funds from FEMA to buy textbooks. Each textbook on average costs between 50 to 55 dollars. That means that it will cost an average of \$250 per child to properly prepare them for classroom work and homework. That's \$350,000 just for books that is needed. We have received many donations of clothing and gift cards to buy school uniforms. My school is one of many in our district that has a school uniform policy. Our district needs more buses. Transportation costs have gone up since fuel prices are high and the buses routes have expanded to include stops at shelters and churches. We will also need to hire additional teachers to ensure that class sizes don't begin to impede individualized instruction. These are some of the hard costs associated with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, but I also want to make sure you're aware of some of the other costs that we need to acknowledge and provide for, such as counseling and other types of supports from children and their families.

The trauma to thousands and thousands of lives is very real and has only begun to

manifest itself. The children from New Orleans who have enrolled in my district are dealing with so many changes, so many new things. Some of them are showing signs similar to “post-traumatic stress syndrome.” They seem frightened, angry, depressed, or a combination of all three. Several fights – pushing and shoving - have broken out between the displaced students and the children who are long-time residents. Why? The children from New Orleans feel that so much has been taken from them—loved ones, their homes, their valued possessions, and their lives as they know them. They have nothing. To top it off, they have to wear hand-me-downs while the children from our community come to school in designer brands to satisfy the uniform requirement. The hostility is understandable given their feelings of loss and their equally understandable need to find a target for their anger.

The educators I’ve met seem to be in denial. One teacher is living in a gym in Houston. She says she is not going back to New Orleans. Instead she is moving to Baton Rouge. But she is so depressed that she is not yet able to go to look for a job. And, she now is responsible for her 90-year old mother who was in a nursing facility in New Orleans but must now live with her. She refuses to talk about New Orleans. This, too, is an understandable human response that many go through when trying to cope with unimaginable loss and shock.

The needs are huge, and the public schools in Louisiana are responding. We are opening our doors and arms to students and their families. So far, we’ve been able to provide the services that our children need, but we don’t know how far the resources can be stretched. Our school has instructed school counselors to meet with all of the displaced students either individually or in small groups. We even are allowing parents access to these counseling services as well. When parents of displaced children have come into our school and indicated that their child had a special education Individualized Education Plan in their previous school, we simply provided the services. We didn’t stop to ask for documentation – it was too important to us that these children continue receiving the services they need. More counselors and behavior interventionists have been hired. Students who have behavior difficulties are being evaluated and behavior plans are being written for them.

The adjustments being made in my school and in my district are evidence that our public schools are designed to provide the widest possible array of services for children and their families. We are uniquely equipped to bring the skills and expertise of a variety of skilled professionals—whether they be counselors, school psychologists, special education teachers, social workers, and more. At the end of the day, we have one job: to meet the needs of each student in a way that allows them to succeed.

Some might wonder whether our displaced children will have to adjust to a different curriculum. While that will probably be the case in other states, one advantage for our students is that our state adopted a state-wide comprehensive curriculum last year. So, for the first time, the same skills are being taught across the state at the same time. It is one way we can provide the continuity to these students that they need. But I want to stress to you that a student won’t be able to sit at a desk and concentrate on $2 + 2$ when his mind is

still attempting to cope with the unfathomable disruption and loss that has occurred in his life. If we ignore that and expect business as usual from our schools and students, we will commit an unbelievable act of negligence.

For now, Shreveport is coping, but at some point, the funds will run out and the problems will remain. We need more funding for counselors and mental health professionals so that we can continue to help our children and their families deal with issues that will remain long after buildings have re-opened or been re-built.

Thank you very much for allowing me to testify today. I hope that Congress can act quickly and in a bipartisan manner so that resources and hope can be delivered to so many who need it.