

Katrina's Displaced School Children

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Testimony

Good afternoon,

I am Sister M. Michaeline Green, O. P., the Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I am also the Chairperson of the Nonpublic School Commission of the Louisiana Dept. of Education.

I want to thank you for your immediate response to the request by Darlene Cilento of St. Rose Academy, Mayfield, PA. I am honored and feel privileged for the opportunity to come before you today in an effort to help all the students affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Its impact on these children's lives is more than just the physical dislocation. There is also the psychological aspect. These children have spent most, if not all their lives in one school. They have built friendships and bonds with both fellow students and faculty. Their world is now upside down. They now find themselves in strange, sometimes, overcrowded and make-shift classrooms, with unknown peers, and different instructors. Not only have they lost their homes, but they have lost one of most important aspects of their lives, their school. The main concern of the parents is to return their children to the schools that they had attended with familiar surroundings, long time friends, educators and school activities. The rebuilding of these destroyed schools is vital in order to relieve the pressure and uncertainty that parents are experiencing. However, many do not know if and when they will have homes, schools, and jobs to return to. Placing these children in a stable, loving, and safe environment now is imperative. When children are cared for and happy, parents can focus on rebuilding their lives.

Louisiana has a unique situation in that one third of all students attend nonpublic schools compared to the national average of 11%. In four of the severely impacted counties (called parishes in LA) around New Orleans, approximately 61,000 students of the 187, 000 total student population attend nonpublic schools from PreK – grades 12. Most of these students come from low to middle income families who are making a great financial sacrifice to send their children to a school of their choice for academic, religious and safety reasons.

Nonpublic schools across Louisiana and the surrounding states have opened their doors to the displaced students. Parents in these schools have supplied uniforms, school supplies, clothing, food, and housing. In our diocese alone, we have had a 25% increase in enrollment due to Katrina. Presently the situation is very fluid, both in population and in circumstances, as areas of Greater New Orleans have been opened up on a daily basis, and now we are faced with the threat of Hurricane Rita. We are responding to the here

and now, and adaptability is required of both parents and schools. Schools and students are challenged with trying to put a large population into a smaller one.

A scholarship or “An Equal Entitlement Certificate” will allow the displaced families to place their children in nonpublic schools similar to their former schools while the rebuilding is taking place. The families need these certificates because some families may have paid their tuition to a school that is no longer there, or, if they haven’t paid their full tuition, they may have no employment or means to pay. Also the schools that are now accommodating these students MUST be reimbursed for the expenses that they have accrued and will continue to accrue. Funding is needed to hire additional teachers and aides, provide additional classrooms and transportation, not to mention added janitorial expenses and utilities.

This situation should be addressed and funded immediately, along with the proposed “equal entitlement certificates”. Without these funding, nonpublic schools may have to turn away some or all of these 61,000 displaced nonpublic students, and this would put an even greater strain on the public school system which is experiencing the many of the same challenges as the nonpublic schools.

I know that each of you here today hears the cries of the displaced families, and recognizes the need to assist ALL students no matter where they are enrolled. Furthermore, I am confident, in our compassion as Americans and as leaders with moral values and with our resolve as a nation, we will meet the needs of these students at present and get them back into the schools that they so desperately long for.

I want to acknowledge and commend each of you on this committee, as well as, President George Bush for your prompt and tireless effort in this dire situation. May God Bless You and God Bless America.

Thank you.