

Testimony of Fr. William F. Maestri, Superintendent of Catholic Schools

To: U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development

Hearing: "A Fresh Start for New Orleans' Children: Improving Education After Katrina"

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The Archdiocese of New Orleans is both a responder to the devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as well as a victim. Throughout these past months, the archdiocese has continued to place ministry over money; the needs of people over our financial concerns. This is a great challenge given the damage the archdiocese has suffered. Consider the following:

1. The Archdiocese owns over 1200 properties throughout eight civil parishes. 1100 of these were damaged by wind, water, or both.
2. The Archdiocese has sustained an \$84 million gap between storm damage and insurance coverage.
3. The Archdiocese continues to provide spiritual and material ministry at a deficit of \$1 million a month.

One of the most significant achievements of the archdiocese's response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is the story of our Catholic schools. Before the hurricanes, the archdiocese operated 107 schools (both elementary and secondary) with 50,000 students in eight civil parishes. To this date, we have reopened 83 schools with almost 40,000 students in all eight civil parishes. In addition to our own students, the archdiocese provided schooling for hundreds of public and private school students whose places of learning had not reopened. NO STUDENT was turned away from ANY school because of tuition.

Our approach was simple: return children to school. Schools supplied and continue to supply anchors for community restoration and provide stability during very unsettling times. Our philosophy was to open schools to allow families to return, for common sense says a family cannot return to begin restoring the area without having a safe place to send their children where they could receive a quality education.

At one point after the storms, the archdiocese had students displaced to 49 states. We set as a priority and our first level of response the location of our displaced students and teachers. Our major task was to locate them and then relocate them into a Catholic school or assist them with placement in an appropriate private or public school where they settled.

The second phase of our response was re-entry. That is, our Catholic schools had to be reopened – safely and quickly. Our first schools were reopened in the third week of

September. In October, we reopened the first schools in Orleans Parish. As the population returned and facilities were made ready, schools were gradually opened to accommodate the growing student population into March of 2006.

The federal aid attained for private schools and private school students through the tremendous efforts of Senators Landrieu and Vitter along with the entire Louisiana delegation and the great support of senators visiting our state to witness first-hand Katrina's wide-spread devastation has been extremely helpful to the Catholic schools and our families in recovery. This landmark legislation that broke the barriers of public and private for the sake of children is to be commended.

Thanks to the immense legislative efforts on behalf of schools throughout the New Orleans area, our displaced students, many of whom lost everything, were eligible for tuition reimbursements totaling \$3 million. This funding also provided relief to schools who did not take tuition from students who could not afford to pay. Our schools are also eligible for \$20 million in Restart funding which will help pay to replace lost data, textbooks, computers and other classroom supplies necessary to the learning environment. Federal funding also made it possible for the Board of Regents for State of Louisiana to create the Return to Learn Program which will provide \$1,000 financial aid awards to eligible high school seniors entering state colleges and universities in the Fall as well as students returning to these institutions. These are just a few examples of the ways cooperation has benefited the archdiocese and the entire area's recovery.

We expect, and hope, to increase our student population in the Fall with the opening of more schools, both elementary and secondary, throughout the area. We know that it is schools that bring back families and prepare children to become leaders. We are, as before Katrina and Rita, committed to providing a quality Catholic education to anyone who wants it, for we do not educate children because they are Catholic, we educate children because we are Catholic.

Thank you for the time to speak with you and for all of your work on our behalf.