

Testimony of Sarah Ottinger, Parent, Audubon Charter School
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development
Hearing on A Fresh Start for New Orleans Children:
Improving Education After Katrina
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New Orleans, Louisiana

Good morning. My name is Sarah Ottinger and I am the mother of an Audubon Charter School student here in New Orleans. My son turns nine today, and I can think of no better way to spend the morning of his birthday than talking about public school education in New Orleans.

First I'd like to thank you, Senator Alexander, for this extraordinary opportunity to share my thoughts about New Orleans public schools following the tragic flooding of our beautiful city. When I was first invited to do so, I thought I would be on a panel of parents today. When I later discovered that I would be the only parent, I felt a bit overwhelmed. I must point out that I am only one parent whose privilege and work experience has made it possible for me to take full advantage of the opportunity this horrible disaster ironically offered to participate in rebuilding my son's school so that it is better than I could have imagined before August 29, 2005. Everyone involved in rebuilding New Orleans public schools should strive to make the same true for all our public school parents and children.

I'd like to share our school's story because I think it is illustrative of what parents and children need in a New Orleans public school system.

The Early Period: Writing Our Charter

In early September of last year, I found myself in Houston, Texas, disconnected from my home, my life, and everything familiar. Some of the first contacts I made, by text messaging and email, were with the parents and teachers at my son's school. I was President of the PTO at the time and we had several email systems in place that allowed those of us who had the means to evacuate to contact one another easily. Those early communications were welcome lifelines in a sea of despair. Our school community was a strong one and it helped us all survive the tragedy unfolding before our eyes on television.

Early on, we exulted in learning that our school building was intact and had not been flooded. But our joy was short-lived. Soon afterward, we heard that our school as it existed prior to Katrina would be closed. Instead, it would reopen as an open access city-wide school that would not preserve Audubon's community or our curriculum. We were a unique school with two unique and separate pre-K through 8th grade curricula: a Montessori program and a French program. Our school was founded in 1980, and we were about to celebrate our 25th anniversary. The storm apparently had wiped us out.

In late September, still in Houston, I received a call from one of the founders of Audubon Montessori/L'Ecole Franco-Americaine. She and the second founder wanted to explore the viability of writing a charter school proposal for Audubon. Would I be willing to contact as many parents and teachers as possible and to schedule a meeting in New Orleans to discuss chartering Audubon?

Yes, I was willing! It would be our only chance to survive as a school and a community. So, many phone calls and email discussions later, a small group of us met in New Orleans on October 8 to discuss our options. We all agreed and committed to push forward to preserve our school in the only way possible—by seeking a charter.

I cannot say that the process of writing the charter proposal was easy. It was a Herculean task that needed to be accomplished in a few short weeks, by October 27, and we reached several junctures of passionate disagreement that required swift, sometimes ruthless, compromise for the greater goal of completing the charter application. My job in the process was to contact parents and teachers to poll their support for the charter and to write the portions of the charter dealing with legal issues and parent involvement. The co-founders of our school, Jill Otis and Joyous Van Buskirk, worked with two teachers to write the remainder of the charter application. I do not know how they did it, although I know the process involved deep commitment and significant sleep deprivation.

Audubon Charter School: Opening Our Doors

The Orleans Parish School Board approved our charter school proposal unanimously on October 28, 2005 and we became Audubon Charter School. We had promised to reopen the school's doors for students on January 3, 2006. The newly created non-profit organization responsible for accomplishing this task, French and Montessori Education, Inc. (FAME), had a bank account with a balance of zero.

At that time, I knew of only five parents from our community living in New Orleans, however several PTO Board members spread out across the country had been actively involved in reestablishing connections with other parents. Our PTO had been incorporated as a non-profit organization for six years and had, along the way, managed to save almost \$140,000 designated for capital improvements to our school. Parents organized to collect all the email addresses we had and establish an online voting site to approve a loan of \$50,000 to FAME so that it could begin the job of opening our school. With that money, FAME was able to rehire our Principal, Janice Dupuy, and to pay for the early expenses involved in reopening our school and registering students. During the two months leading up to reopening Audubon Charter School, everything else was accomplished by volunteers and donations.

I cannot overstate our Principal's leadership abilities or her commitment to our school and our community. She had lost family members and her house to the flooding, and her own children were in schools in Baton Rouge and St. Francisville. She had no place to live in New Orleans. Yet she returned, organized volunteer parents, teachers, and staff, and began the tremendous process of recreating our safe, vibrant, academically excellent school in a devastated city. She did all this with grace, compassion, and composure that were rare in our city following Katrina, for we were a city of traumatized people who were all very raw around the edges.

We knew our success and viability as a school depended on registering a sufficient number of students (we estimated 200) for the spring semester. We also knew that preserving the culture of our school and community meant reaching our diverse parent body and an equally diverse new parent body. We were terrified, frankly, that our school would lose its economic and racial diversity. Prior to Katrina, 41% of our student body had been receiving free or reduced lunches and 59% of the student body was African American.

Our online communications were reaching only 10% of parents and largely those with economic privilege, so we organized a phone outreach campaign. A single parent combed through the emergency contacts for every child that had been registered to attend Audubon in the fall and compiled a database of last known telephone numbers. Several parent volunteers then called the 500 previously registered families one by one, generally reaching families through cell phone numbers. Those who made the phone calls were overwhelmed by the losses our overall community of parents had sustained, yet equally overwhelmed by the tears of joy and relief shed when parents learned that Audubon would reopen. Many parents expressed that the knowledge that their child or children were assured a place at Audubon, beginning either in January or the following August, gave them hope that they might return to New Orleans despite the significant losses they had sustained.

Meanwhile our Principal located and hired as many of our previous faculty and staff as she could contact and began the hiring process for new school personnel. Her almost 30 years' experience in the Orleans Parish Public Schools, her excellent reputation as a teacher, administrator, and leader, and Audubon's excellent reputation as a school made it possible for her to recruit and hire the most qualified and committed administrators and teachers.

As we began envisioning reopening, we realized that we needed to put as many of our former strengths as a school back in place. For a long time, after school care at Audubon, offered through the New Orleans Public School ADEPT program, had been considered inadequate by many parents due mainly to what we considered to be a failure to provide both structured and enriching activities for the children as well as adequate adult supervision and interaction with

children. For two years prior to Katrina, the PTO had organized and offered an after school arts program, called Arts Reach, to children who wished to register for a fee. We did our best to make scholarships available to children who could not afford the fee. We offered classes taught by local art teachers, musicians, and artists ranging from music and dance, to painting and pottery, to basketball and chess (we had a broad definition of “arts”).

We knew we needed to get our after school arts program up and running by January. The former director of the program would not be returning to New Orleans, but we found a parent artist who had previously expressed interest in directing the program. She spent countless hours from Florida tracking down previous teachers and creating a new curriculum without any sense of the number of children who would be returning to Audubon. When Audubon reopened in January it did so with a full curriculum of after school arts classes and we were able to give out 50 scholarships to students who could not afford to register for the classes.

In addition, Ms. Dupuy, our Principal, hired an extremely qualified coordinator for after school care. The new coordinator ran the program as her own stand-alone program, though the program maintained a bank account administered through Audubon Charter. The new coordinator hired her own staff for the program and made numerous changes to what had existed before, resulting in much higher quality after school care. Adults staffing the program engaged meaningfully with children and provided many activities, allowing children to choose what they liked to do with their time. My son, who had always resented after school care, started asking me if he could stay for it on days I didn't need it. The main and very simple difference for him was that he was allowed as much time as he wanted to play outside on the basketball court and playground equipment.

I should point out in this context that the playground equipment at our school, which is excellent, was not something we had obtained through the public school system. Instead, a couple years earlier when parents became disgusted with broken-down rusty playground equipment, and concerned at the number of injuries to children that occurred on the equipment, the PTO voted to spend about \$70,000 of its capital improvement fund to have the equipment installed.

In addition to strengthening our after school programming, we were able to provide our children with many additional opportunities for learning and growth during the school day. Given the anticipated budget, Ms. Dupuy was able to hire a full-time art teacher, physical education teacher, and music teacher as well as a part-time dance teacher. Ms. Dupuy was also able to hire part-time teaching assistants through the FAME budget for the school, something the school system had never provided and parents had diligently worked to raise funding for through the PTO.

Finally, we were able to do what we had been frustrated from doing for many years as an Orleans Parish Public School. We are now able to provide ongoing Montessori training and certification for our teachers and administrators in the Montessori program, as well as ongoing training in France through the French government for our teachers and administrators in the French program. Particularly when it came to our Montessori program, for years prior to becoming a charter school we had fought system-wide curriculum requirements and teacher training imposed on our school that had no relevance to the educational curriculum provided there. Freeing ourselves from requirements that did not make sense at our school was truly liberating to administrators, teachers, staff, and parents alike.

Audubon Charter School: Surviving and Growing

We reopened in January with 250 students and crept up in numbers in the course of the spring semester to 350 students. Our biggest challenge in the beginning was that we did not have a steady source of money and had very little in our bank account. Without grants from the French government and loans from the PTO capital improvements account, Audubon would not have met payroll and expenses on several occasions through March. Both federal and state funding was shamefully slow in coming and did not arrive on dates we had been promised it would arrive.

Audubon also would not have opened its doors or kept them open without the valuable business operations assistance of a past Audubon parent who quit her job so that she could put all her time, on a volunteer basis as a member of the FAME Board of Directors, into working through the myriad of services and ongoing maintenance related to keeping a school building open. She was assisted by Alvarez & Marsal, which met with all the newly-opening charter schools in New Orleans as a group, to provide guidance and group bargaining power to the charter schools working through the complexities of repairing storm damage to school buildings, reestablishing office communications systems, providing school lunches and custodial services, obtaining adequate insurance, establishing payroll and billing systems, and the many, many other tasks that had formerly been handled by the school system.

Seeking funding to sustain our viability as a charter school was critical. Until the FAME Board of Directors was up and running and fully established as a 501(c)(3), the PTO Board identified grant opportunities and wrote applications for them. We also sent out a fundraising letter to every French and Montessori school we could find across the country. Once school reopened, the FAME Board established an executive fundraising committee composed of FAME and PTO Board members and other parent volunteers. Our FAME Board Chair secured a donation of a part-time experienced fundraiser and grant writer and under her direction we had weekly phone conference calls to aggressively pursue grants and donations. The end result was that between January and the

close of our fiscal year on June 30, we raised \$500,000 in private grants and donations. This includes a local grant we recently received for a full-time social worker, a particularly critical need for all schools post-Katrina.

Meanwhile, our Principal and her very capable administrative staff applied for every form of state and federal funding appropriate to our school and student body. This was no easy task, as deadlines and requirements kept changing. While several applications for Title grants have been successful, my understanding is that we must spend the money before we can receive it through reimbursement. Our goal in private fundraising is to have a sufficient reserve of cash on hand to benefit from Title funding.

We have actively sought in-kind donations as well monetary ones. Our teachers have wish lists, and we provide those to people who contact us wanting to make donations. In the course of the spring semester we have received donations of books, sports equipment, musical instruments, video equipment, and art supplies, and we have a large donation of computers forthcoming. Over the summer, a parent carpenter will be building wood cubbies in Montessori classrooms for the cost of the materials, to be paid for by the PTO. And we received an extraordinary donation from the Rex Parade Crewe's Project Purple. They donated the services of a local landscaper and the plants and trees the landscaper selected, then recruited an out-of-town pharmaceutical company that was in New Orleans for a convention to do the planting. The ongoing watering of the plants and trees became the project of several Montessori classes. Our school grounds have never been so beautiful.

The FAME Board made a critical decision back in February, one that I wish all charter schools would make. We will be an open enrollment school in Kindergarten through third grades. While preference will be given to students who attend Audubon's pre-K or students with prior Montessori or French education, the remaining spots will be determined by lottery once the application procedure has been completed. Admission to the 4th – 8th grades, which will likely have very few spots available, will be determined by a matrix system that factors in an applicant's ability to excel in our French or Montessori curriculum.

In May, the Orleans Parish School Board granted Audubon's request for an additional school building. We will open in August with two campuses, the Broadway Campus and the Carrollton Campus. The Broadway Campus will house students in Kindergarten through 5th grade. The Carrollton Campus will house our pre-K and 6th through 8th grade students. Our enrollment will expand significantly with an anticipated 650 students next year. The numbers are being added primarily in pre-K through 3rd grades. Over the next several years, our numbers will increase in the 4th through 8th grade classes and our overall enrollment will increase to 850 students. This represents an increase of almost 350 students from our pre-Katrina days.

Audubon is an oasis in the midst of the destruction to our city and our lives following the levee breaks. The atmosphere of the school is lighter, less tense, more optimistic following becoming a charter. People are happy—teachers, administrators, staff, and parents. Governing decisions are made by a Board that wholeheartedly supports our culture and curricula, and makes its decisions in an even-handed, fair manner. We have more resources and are able to allocate them consistent with the mission of our school. We are stronger than we have been for a long, long time and are no longer subject to constantly changing policy in constantly changing school system administrations. We have experienced a rebirth.

There is not a day that goes by when I do not feel how fortunate I am to drop my son off at Audubon. We are blessed beyond what I could have imagined. I'm not an educator, but I think what I have learned as an involved parent can be applied system-wide in public schools.

Lessons Learned

Schools thrive when their community and culture are strong. A strong school community and culture develops over time with strong leadership; with a strong academic curriculum, enhanced by opportunities outside the academic—the arts, physical education, excellent after care programming; with competent and committed administration, teachers, and staff who are appreciated, supported, and compensated for their commitment and caring; with welcoming, well-maintained school facilities and grounds that include high quality play and sports areas; and with the active involvement of parents and caregivers. If everyone involved in rebuilding New Orleans Public Schools aspires to these essential components, we will thrive as a public school system.

What Parents and Caregivers Can Contribute

I want to spend my time today talking about what we call “parent involvement.” There is universal agreement that parent and caretaker involvement in schools is an essential component to successful schools. Certainly the RSD Plan identifies parent, as well as community, involvement as one of its seven core principles in rebuilding schools.

But “parent involvement” is a passive concept: it implies schools reaching out to parents to direct their participation in the school community. That is not enough to make schools strong. Parents and caregivers need to become not just “involved” in school communities; they need to become a force in school communities, not dependent on school administration for their survival as a force.

At Audubon, parents are a force. We have our own separate existence, our own separate non-profit corporation, and we define our mission and goals for the work we do for our school independent of the school administration. Do I

think we are able to do all this because we are somehow better parents than those in other schools who do not have such structure in place? Not at all. I think we are able to do it because some of our parents have the incredible resource of time to devote to our school. We have several parents who are not working outside the home and others who have jobs that allow flexibility, making it easier to spend time in and around the school. We also have a good pool of skills in our parent body that have been essential to our organizing: business, secretarial, fundraising, legal. We actively seek out and utilize those skills. The bulk of the work we do is accomplished by a handful of parents. We then meet once a month as a full parent body to update and take direction from every parent and caretaker who chooses to participate in our PTO.

I believe that every school will have at least one natural parent or caretaker leader, probably many. The real issue is whether those leaders can afford to spend their time in their children's school. We need to create paid parent organizer positions in schools with a budget for the organizing work they do. These would not be "liaison" positions, as we had in the past. The job of the parent organizer would be to organize, not just to facilitate communication. And the parent's organizing role would need to be supported by the Principal and overall school administration. Too often, those in control fear true empowerment, which implies independence. Good leadership recognizes that we all benefit from the independence and creativity of differing perspectives.

A good parent organizer with a modest budget would be able to draw upon and enlist help from the community at large. Our PTO, for example, would be happy to meet with other parent groups to talk about defining mission and goals, setting up organizational structure, stimulating parent interest in and attendance at meetings, even incorporating as non-profit organizations should that be the direction groups wish to take. In fact, just last August before the levees broke, a number of PTOs and PTAs had begun meeting to share our knowledge and ideas for the future of our schools. This is just one example of resources out there. Others include free training on fundraising and grant-writing, free training on advocating for students with special needs, free leadership training. The list goes on and on, and a good organizer can put that list together and make it happen.

A good parent organizer would set up avenues of communication that work for parents, through a newsletter or informally, by being there when parents drop off and pick up their children. I had some of the most important conversations with parents at the school gate in the morning. They couldn't show up to meetings, but they could contribute, right there, where they were most able to do so. Phone trees are essential to communication as well and can include phone numbers of relatives or neighbors who can pass on information to those who don't have telephones. While email works for some, it leaves many in the dark and simply cannot be relied upon to communicate meaningfully with parents and caregivers.

A good parent organizer would schedule meetings in a time and manner that is most convenient, providing free food and childcare, advertising topics that parents do not wish to miss. In doing so, the organizer would begin to build interest and momentum. Word of mouth travels fast, and if meetings are interesting and well-run, increasing numbers will show up for meetings.

These are just a few cornerstones of organizing communities. We know a lot about successful community organizing techniques—there's lots of literature out there about it. But the most important aspect of organizing any community is that ongoing leadership be developed from within. The school system itself must make the initial investment in developing parent leadership from within, by hiring a parent organizer and giving that person a working budget, but then it must get out of the way so that parents and caregivers can learn their own power.

I'm sure there are many who would say that I have no idea what I'm talking about, that I come at this as a parent in a privileged community. I do—that is certainly my experience as an Audubon parent. But I also come at this as an advocate and organizer. When I worked at the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, and we were trying to put an end to abusive conditions of incarceration for kids and envision more effective rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration, we worked with parents of children in prisons across the state. With minimal and non-intrusive support from our office, parents formed a group called Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, they developed a mission statement and goals, and they ultimately ended up powerfully advocating in the state legislature for closure of juvenile prisons. Due in large part to parent efforts, the population in Louisiana's juvenile prisons has been cut in half.

If you know anything about which children we lock up in Louisiana, you know it is children from our most oppressed communities. The parents who organized against abusive incarceration came mostly from very poor communities and were mostly African American. They also overcame the stigma of being dead-beat parents, because we regularly and completely inappropriately assume that parents cause all their children's problems, rather than acknowledging that societal conditions make it virtually impossible for so many children to succeed and thrive.

It is possible, indeed necessary to the survival of public schools, for parents from oppressed communities to organize around their children's education. Such organization and participation, combined with excellent school leadership, teachers, and staff, a strong curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse student body, and resources and opportunities that benefit all children, together create strong school cultures and communities. We desperately need to move in this direction in all schools in New Orleans.

Talk is cheap, and I hesitate to put out all these opinions without making a commitment to following through on what I suggest. I challenge this Senate Committee, as well as the distinguished community leaders that are part of the two panels speaking today, to find a way to devote resources to a full-time parent organizer in each and every school that reopens without an organized parent body in place. In exchange, I commit here and now to work with other parents in the city to establish a non-profit city-wide parent organization devoted to securing private funding and training opportunities for parent groups in the schools most in need of resources in New Orleans.

Thank you again, very much, for the opportunity to share my views on this critical topic.