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Presentation - Education Committee
Friday, July 14, 2006

HISTORY of ACSA

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, a small group of Algiers community leaders began writing a proposal to charter all 13 schools in Algiers with the goal of opening these schools as an association of charter schools in the 2006-07 school year. Then Hurricane Katrina struck. As a result, the governor, Kathleen Blanco, and the Louisiana state legislature worked cooperatively with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) to grant approval for the opening of five (5) charter schools. The Westbank of New Orleans, i.e., Algiers, had the least amount of damage to its community and school buildings in particular and was, therefore, the natural selection for this opening. Three (3) PreK-8 and two (2) high schools were opened by mid-December as Type 4 charters, through the OPSB. In order to open these schools, a process that should have encompassed months was accomplished within weeks. 35 individuals were interviewed to select five principals. Over 600 teachers were screened to select about 150. One additional K-8 school was opened in March to accommodate more returning families post-Katrina. When the school year was brought to an end in early June, 2006, nearly 4,000 students were enrolled in the Algiers charter schools, representing 35% of public school students in Orleans Parish post-Katrina. The extraordinary efforts of teachers, principals, staff and parents all assisted in garnering a year of success from what began as a tumultuous and devastating natural occurrence in the city of New Orleans.

This initiative was made possible through the collaborative efforts of a small group of five individuals from the firm of Alvarez and Marsal. This firm created the ACSA business infrastructure and managed all day-to-day non-instructional activities for the schools, including human resources, technology, facilities, contracted school support services (custodial, cafeteria, transportation, etc), finance, budget and accounting for

ACSA schools. In November of 2005, I was hired as Director to run the academic side of the association. Two other individuals were brought on to assist with instruction and special education. Alvarez and Marsal has, almost entirely selected and trained their full-time replacements and the transition is nearly complete. When all is said and done, the central staff of the association will be comprised of approximately 15 individuals allowing principals to focus on the work of student achievement.

In the spring of 2006, ACSA applied for six (6) additional schools from the state Recovery School District (RSD). To date, two (2) additional schools have been granted charters and will open in the fall of 2006, bringing the total to eight (8) charter schools. Chronologically speaking, the first five (5) schools opened by ACSA were chartered by the OPSB. In the spring of 2006, the state legislature began the state RSD into which over 100 of the 120 Orleans Parish schools fell. These schools were deemed as underperforming. Of the six (6) schools ACSA had just recently opened, four (4) were swept into the RSD while two (2) remained under the control of the OPSB. The two (2) new schools that will open in the fall under ACSA leadership are also RSD schools. In short, six of the eight ACSA schools are now Type 5 charters, chartered by the RSD to ACSA and were categorized as underperforming prior to the storm. The two remaining schools are Type 4 charters, chartered by the OPSB to ACSA.

PROGRESS of ACSA

In order to evaluate the success of Algiers schools in its shortened first year of operation, three tools were selected to determine progress:

1. pre and post testing,
2. a year-end parent survey, and
3. a persistence survey.

A nationally-normed standardized reading and mathematics test was selected from the Pearson Company, with the pre-test being given in January to all students K-12. The

post-test was given in May to the same body of students. Preliminary results indicate progress at all grade levels with the exception of 7 and 8th grade, which reflects the national trend. We feel this demonstrates positive growth given a less-than-normal year. Parent surveys were sent to all parents. One question asked parents to respond to the statement, “Overall, my child’s school does a good job”. 75% of the responses stated “almost always” or “always”. A persistence survey is simply how many students return to the school, and if they don’t, the reason why is asked. This survey will be administered in the fall when the new school year begins and the students return.

There are basically two ways schools can improve. The first is screening students so as to accept only the higher-performing students. The second is to increase the capacity of the adults who work with all types of students. ACSA has chosen the latter which is a longer but much more effective school improvement strategy and arguably better serves society as a whole. As a great move forward, the initial six ACSA schools will begin implementing the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) in the fall of 2006 (the remaining two ACSA schools will begin this process in the fall of 2007). The TAP program is supported by the Milliken Foundation and is endorsed and supported by the State Department of Education (DOE). The TAP Program consists of two master teachers and up to five mentor teachers in every school. The master teachers have no assigned teaching duties and spend their time helping teachers improve their instruction, and therefore student learning. Mentor teachers have regular teaching assignments but serve as cluster leaders of teachers to implement school improvement efforts. The TAP Program utilizes teacher evaluations and student data to determine incentive bonuses for teachers. We believe that the TAP Program will drive, or at the very least be the core of, our school improvement efforts.

Research tells us that professional development is most successful when it is job-embedded, supported in the classroom and continuous over time. Rarely does professional development hit this triad. ACSA, in collaboration with the RSD, has begun planning for professional development which will be delivered by representatives from the well-respected Ontario Institute for School Improvement (OISE) of the University of

Toronto. Teachers will learn and/or improve teaching techniques such as cooperative learning and seeking relevance. It is then the Master Teachers' job to act as helpers in making sure that these pedagogical techniques are implemented correctly in the classroom. School improvement literature indicates that, almost always, school structures change (e.g., regular public schools to charter schools) while teaching in the classroom remains the same. This produces little significant gain in student learning. We believe that the sound combination of improved pedagogy (OISE) with support from master teachers (TAP), combined with the freedom from bureaucracy that is the cornerstone of charter schools will produce the much-desired effective schools New Orleans needs and deserves.

Equally as important as teacher professional development is the personal and professional growth of the school leader. In conjunction with the School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans' Learning Initiatives Program (SLCLI), Algiers principals will be afforded the opportunity to participate in two years of professional development by way of the SLC Fellows' Program. This research-based, proven program provides school teams with the ability to delve deeply into their school data and carefully plan school improvement. The SLC Fellows' Program demonstrates that public schools which participate in the program show an average of 54% increase in school performance scores (SPS).

To insure a pool of highly qualified and competent future school leaders for Algiers' schools, ACSA has entered into a partnership with Our Lady of Holy Cross College (OLHCC) also located in Algiers. The goal of this collaborative program is to provide a selected group of 20 future leaders a masters degree within two years at little or no cost to them. College professors, along with adjuncts who are practitioners in the field, will provide instruction in the state-mandated, newly-redesigned 36-hour Educational Leadership program. The capstone experience for these masters' candidates will be an internship that is a combination of observation, participation and leadership that encompasses 250 hours which spans two internship semesters.

FUTURE of ACSA

Much as proven school improvement is driven by correctly implemented professional development, decisions made at the level greatly enhance the possibility of school improvement. For that reason, ACSA placed much of the decision-making authority into the hands of school leadership. For example, for the upcoming school year, all schools were provided with a budget made up of core staff (e.g., pupil teacher ration 25:1) and mandated spending (i.e. transportation, janitorial, etc) but were also provided the opportunity to create their own spending plan with the remaining budget funds available. With this flexibility, the principal could assess the unique needs at their particular school and implement programs of their choosing to address those unique needs, such as lowering pupil teacher ratio, creating an arts program, providing specialized professional development to staff, among a plethora of opportunities as needed at the school site level. Because of the efforts of the central staff and their dogged pursuit of effective and efficient spending, schools were provided an opportunity unheard of previously. It is the principle of efficient shared services on a manageable scale (8 schools) that helps to provide this opportunity.

Mayor Ray Nagin's *Bring Back New Orleans Commission on Education* suggested, as a model for the city, small associations of schools that share services. To an overwhelming degree, ACSA is doing just that. In fact, when the entire teaching corps was asked to identify the thing they most liked about working with ACSA, over 60% stated they liked the other teachers they worked with. That is an important factor because creating a collegial atmosphere (building relationships) is an often forgotten element in creating strong teaching staffs – and strong teaching staffs created improved student achievement.

Given the uphill environment of ACSA's beginning and the start-up nature of the entire year, ACSA did not start schools with a particular focus (e.g. an arts focus, a communications school, technology) and therefore did not engage the community and parents in developing a program unique and designed for each school. The focus was to

open well-run and academically successful, improved schools. For that reason, ACSA schools will spend the 2006-2007 school year engaging the school community and the larger community in looking at and deciding upon a focus for each school. This is important because if the research on charter school success is reduced to a single common denominator – parent and community involvement is the single most important predictor of success. We will backtrack and garner that input over the next year.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the financial support from congress. The 20.9 million dollar charter school initiative helped insure that a year of financial stability that will pay dividends in the future. Additional funding will assure that the local portion of our schools' Minimum Foundation Program funding is adequate and even allow us to create innovative and imaginative programs for our students. While the funding did not arrive until near schools end, we have been able to leverage it to enhance our future. I bring to you the gratitude of our entire association.

Margaret Meade has been quoted saying "NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED PEOPLE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD, INDEED, IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT EVER HAS!" Opening schools in New Orleans post-Katrina was a monumental task willingly accepted by a small group of very committed individuals. Opening better schools in New Orleans post-Katrina is the moral imperative that – that committed group is dedicated to accomplishing.