



BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 534

For immediate release:

Thursday, October 13, 2005

Educating the Children of Katrina

by **John C. Goodman**

Hurricane Katrina wrought devastation and chaos, leaving hundreds of thousands unemployed and homeless. Among the victims are at least 372,000 displaced students.

■ In Louisiana, more than 247,000 public and private school students were displaced, 489 schools were closed, and school buildings were destroyed and damaged in at least six parishes.

■ In Mississippi, more than 125,000 students were forced elsewhere.

■ A total of 226 schools in 30 districts were closed in Mississippi, and almost 30 schools were destroyed.

The question is: What are we going to do with these students?

Allowing Education Dollars to Follow the Students. Neighboring states such as Texas have already begun to integrate displaced students into their schools, but according to Education Secretary Margaret Spellings there are no clear answers yet where exactly the money will come from to educate them. President Bush has assigned Spellings to come up with a plan to provide aid for the states. Here is an idea she should consider: instead of providing funding to schools in general, give it only to the campuses that students and their parents choose.

Allowing Campuses to Compete. While Katrina has been a tragedy of unprecedented proportions, the influx of a small community's worth of homeless schoolchildren provides us with an opportunity. It's time to try something radically new. Let's have every campus in the regions where displaced students are temporarily residing—every public, private or charter school—compete for these kids. For each student who enrolls, the schools should receive \$7,500 in federal funds—which is the current

average annual cost per pupil in the public schools, according to the Texas Education Commissioner. These funds would be in addition to normal local or state funding. Note: All the money would go to the campus and none would go to the school district or other bureaucracies.

The idea is already gaining traction: President

Bush has recommended channeling funding to displaced families for enrollment in public or private schools as part of his hurricane relief effort, and House Committee on Education & the Workforce Chairman John Boehner has proposed a program of school vouchers for families with displaced children.

Under a system that forces schools to compete, a school that attracts even one student could start thinking about bonuses for all its teachers. Attract three or four, and it could afford to hire another teacher or provide more generous health insurance. Attract 135 students, and the school would reap more than \$1 million.

But to get these extra funds, the schools would first have to attract new customers. And that would require

Comparison of Sixth Grade Students			
Harrell Budd Elementary	vs.	Kennedy Curry Middle School	
No. 3	Value-Added Rank in Dallas Area*	No. 361	
97.6%	Passing Rate on State Exam	52%	
99%	% Minority	95%	
92%	% Low Income	64%	
\$4,157	Aver. Spent Per Pupil	\$4,620	
25	Aver. Class Size	22	

* Out of 361 schools.
 Note: Harrell Budd and Kennedy-Curry are only 6 miles apart.
 Source: National Center for Policy Analysis calculations.

BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 534

Page 2

a brand new way of thinking in a system where the only experience with competition is magnet schools that try to appeal to white kids living in the suburbs.

Freeing Schools From Regulations. Schools that admit large numbers of Katrina evacuees should also be freed from other restrictions that limit the supply of qualified teachers. Mathematicians and scientists should be allowed to teach high school students without taking courses in education. And schools should be able to pay higher salaries to lure good teachers and those with rare skills back into the classroom.

Exercising Choice. If you were a parent evacuated to Dallas-Fort Worth, for example, and you could choose from the whole shebang, where would you send your child to school? You might be tempted to try wealthy Highland Park, suburban Plano or one of the pricier private schools. But that might not be the best option, particularly if you are minority, poor and your child is scoring well-below grade level. What you need is a school that is really good at taking disadvantaged, minority children who are underperforming and boosting their achievement. Believe it or not, there are such schools, and more than you might think.

Two years ago, the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) developed a value-added report card for Texas schools. The idea was that schools should be judged based on what they do, not on the abilities of the students who happen to be in their classrooms. Children in neighborhoods with intact families and highly educated parents are supposed to score well on standardized tests. Children living in poverty are not expected to do as well. The relevant question is: What does the school do to improve the scores of the students it has? This is the value added by each teacher during each year of instruction. For an individual student, value added can be measured by the increase in the student's score on objective annual tests.

Using state-of-the-art statistical techniques, Prof. Lori Taylor, currently of the Bush School of Government and

Public Service at Texas A&M University, calculated the value-added for several categories of sixth grade students. The results: the now shut-down Wilmer-Hutchins school district in low-income southern Dallas County ranked next to last in the area in teaching black students, dead last in teaching Hispanics and at the very bottom of the list in teaching economically disadvantaged students.

By contrast, consider Harrell Budd Elementary School, which is only a few bus stops from Wilmer-Hutchins' Kennedy-Curry Middle School. On the average, the sixth grade students at Budd have even lower incomes and more are minorities, and the school had less money to spend per pupil and larger class sizes than did Kennedy-Curry. Yet Budd is one of the best schools in Dallas for the value it adds. [See the table.]

Allowing Specialization. Budd is one of the few schools in the Dallas area that excels with almost every type of student. But there are other schools that excel with subgroups of students. For example, some schools do a great job with slow learners, but a mediocre job with fast learners. For other schools, the reverse is true. Some do a good job with Hispanic students, but a mediocre job with whites and blacks. Some are good with blacks, but mediocre with nonblacks.

Thus, evacuee parents could improve their children's education by matching their children's particular needs with the schools that can best meet those needs. For their part, schools could enhance their income by advertising what they do best and getting even better at it.

Conclusion. Texas and other states will make certain that the children of Louisiana and Mississippi get enrolled somewhere. But the kids may do a lot better if they and their parents become empowered consumers in an education marketplace. To find out how well they can do, we need to give them the freedom to choose.

John C. Goodman is president of the National Center for Policy Analysis.

Note: Nothing written here should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the National Center for Policy Analysis or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

The NCPA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public policy organization. We depend entirely on the financial support of individuals, corporations and foundations that believe in private sector solutions to public policy problems. You can contribute to our effort by mailing your donation to our Dallas headquarters or logging on to our Web site at www.ncpa.org and clicking "An Invitation to Support Us."