

**A Position Paper On**

Education  
Reform  
Measures

Committee For A Better New Orleans /  
Metropolitan Area Committee

CBNO/MAC

# Summary of CBNO/MAC Recommendations and Support

The following have been extracted from the “CBNO/MAC Position Paper” on Education Reform”. These positions and recommendations reflect the compilation of several months of research, discussions and on-site surveys at public forums and a citywide poll commissioned by CBNO/MAC to determine public sentiment on education and reform in Orleans Parish.

## **SAFETY & DISCIPLINE**

CBNO/MAC has played a major role in the movement to establish an alternative learning environment for behaviorally challenged students who have been expelled or face long-term suspensions. Site visits and best practices research led the organization to recommend to the Orleans Parish School Board that it retain the services of Community Education Partners (CEP) in the establishment of just such a school, modeled after successful sites in both Philadelphia and Houston.

The School Board authorized the issuance of a Request For Proposals in 2002 and has taken no action in this regard since then. Since several service providers exist nationally, and the goal is to secure the best facility appropriate for the needs of Orleans Parish students, CBNO/MAC urges the Board and the Superintendent to immediately start the formal competitive process to identify and select a service provider so that this school can become a reality and resource to the system in the near future.

In addition, CBNO/MAC will follow-through on its commitment to assist the Orleans Parish School system in identifying partners and seeking funds to facilitate and expedite an alternative school of this type, consistent with goal four of the education action plan in the Blueprint For A Better New Orleans.

CBNO/MAC echoes the sentiments of many educators and community leaders in supporting the privatizing of school security and in the integration of social service providers at individual school sites.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

It is incumbent upon the School Board and the new administration to develop a comprehensive, systematic plan to renovate or build schools. In order to guide the work process, the plan must include an updated facility analysis and budget, by

site. Assuming a referendum will be needed, the public needs to be informed, consulted and reassured the capital improvement funds will be spent as needed, within the timeframe(s) specified at the sites identified.

## **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

In order for schools to provide a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning, CBNO/MAC believes initiatives to increase parental involvement must be accompanied by an integration of community resources and social services into the school site. Finally, facing unwieldy teacher/pupil ratios and increased demands for individualized attention, teachers must be provided with greater measures of assistance and support within the classroom. The Superintendent, in putting forth his reform initiatives, should utilize existing, recent studies, such as "Safe Schools Strong Children" conducted in Central City, and community leaders who are willing to assist, to ensure that an effective, comprehensive plan of action is put in place to involve parents.

## **RESOURCES/SUPPLIES**

The Superintendent should use the fiscal audit to structure a better financial and resource management mechanism at both the central office and school site levels that becomes effective immediately in order to rectify these problems prior to the 2003 school year.

## **CENTRAL OFFICE**

CBNO/MAC is encouraged by recent moves by the new Superintendent to reconfigure the central office. In a radical move that has been welcomed by those in and outside of the system, positions are being redefined and streamlined, cutting out much of the existing bureaucracy. Central to that reconfiguration is the downsizing of middle management and a return to having (4) area superintendents whose authority, responsibility and accountability will be clearly defined. This is without question, an important step in the right direction.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

CBNO/MAC has researched the issue of accountability and has a plan in draft form, to be reviewed by the new Superintendent for his input and approval. CBNO/MAC's plan will allow the local community to better assess the progress and accomplishment of its public education system and its leaders on a semi-

annual basis. With the support of the Principal's Association of New Orleans and anticipated cooperation with the Superintendent, CBNO/MAC's subcommittee on accountability will work diligently to create and maintain new measurements of accountability, hire an outside evaluator to conduct the evaluation, monitor its implementation and report the findings to the general public semi-annually.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING**

CBNO/MAC supports Teach Greater New Orleans as an effective and efficient program to recruit experienced leaders and community members to become trained and certified teachers. This is a model program that directly and positively impacts student achievement and sets a foundation for making education reforms and improvements take hold. This is an exciting development, long overdue, and reflects the opportunities that exist by expanding the system's current outsourcing policies.

CBNO/MAC feels that, among other things, the administration must conduct an immediate examination of the current system of training and development for Board members, principals, and teachers, and the resources available to provide better training. PANOPSI and UTNO should be motivated to become involved in the development of a plan that addresses the specific needs of existing personnel in their respective positions, but also facilitates advance preparation for those who are subsequently promoted.

## **COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

In a proactive effort to address this particular issue, CBNO/MAC has initiated discussions with other established community service organizations on the creation of a non-profit volunteer organization that would function as the liaison between the school system and the community. If accepted by the Superintendent as an outsourced capacity, this independent agency will work with individual schools and their principals to determine areas of need and will then diligently work to plug the community into schools in the form of volunteers, donations, and administrative counsel and support.

## **LEGISLATION: ALTERNATIVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE**

CBNO/MAC supports the concept of adding specific skill sets to enhance the capacity of the Orleans Parish School Board, as well as business and parent representation, and therefore supports the addition of at least two appointed

school board members to the existing elected board.

## **LEGISLATION: TAKEOVER OF LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

Understanding the great resources and expertise that will be required to make this option successful, CBNO/MAC supports the BESE takeover of lowest performing schools.

## **LEGISLATION: VOUCHERS**

CBNO/MAC will support the use of school vouchers, on a limited basis, for students in Corrective Action II and III schools only, to determine the efficacy of school vouchers as a viable, interim approach to afford students, whose parents so choose, alternate options and relief from their present school situation.

Certainly, a timeframe should be set for overall evaluation - i.e. to determine if students who have used vouchers are performing at an acceptable educational level and show evidence of consistent growth; if school ratings of those schools accepting vouchers have changed, decreased or remained the same; and if the Orleans Parish School System and students are showing evidence of improvement within the goals that are being set by the Superintendent and the standards set by BESE.

Pending these evaluations, it would then facilitate the public's ability to make a true determination on the real value of vouchers as an alternative option.

Schools that are ultimately eligible to accept vouchers should be currently in operation at the time the legislation is passed and provide evidence of student or school achievement consistent with state and/or national standards. New schools that may open subsequent to any legislation being passed should not be eligible and should not be able to use this situation as a means to "finance" private or parochial schools. Additionally, those schools accepting eligible students must also use a nationally accredited and standardized testing instrument to track and document student performance in the new environment so that BESE, parents and the community have a means for evaluation.

## **LEAP**

**C**BNO/MAC supports strong accountability systems to measure school and student performance. Nevertheless, CBNO/MAC has strong ideological opposition to LEAP as the standard of accountability as it is understood to be currently implemented and weighed.

**C**BNO/MAC will take a leadership role in the effort that many public school parents and educators have been fighting since its inception, in investigating and assessing the impact of LEAP. This includes its impact in Louisiana - on the individual student, its weight and impact in determining school or district scores and its impact on the African-American community. Additionally, this assessment will include a determination of LEAP's credibility in relation to other nationally accepted standardized measurement tests as well as how it fits federal requirements under "no child left behind". These findings will be utilized to determine if the use of LEAP is appropriate or if other or additional accountability measurements need to be considered.

**A Position Paper On**

# Education Reform Measures

Committee For A Better New Orleans /  
Metropolitan Area Committee

**CBNO/MAC**

909 Poydras Street  
Suite 1700  
New Orleans, LA 70112  
Tel: (504) 584-5019  
Fax: (504) 584-5077  
[WWW.CBNO.ORG](http://WWW.CBNO.ORG)

# Introduction

Public education in urban America today is in severe disarray. As the largest metropolitan area in Louisiana, New Orleans' story is no different. Rarely a day goes by without our national media, politicians and citizenry bemoaning the "failure of schools." However, in an arena of bad company, New Orleans falls to even greater depths, often bringing up the rear of the nation in standardized test scores, graduation rates, teacher pay and the list goes on. Add to that the deplorable condition of our physical structures, lack of parental involvement, declining enrollment, low morale and fiscal mismanagement and you have the recipe for a system in crisis.

The Committee for a Better New Orleans/Metropolitan Area Committee (CBNO/MAC), a non-partisan, multi-racial assembly of civic, business and religious leaders brought together to explore the critical issues facing New Orleans through honest and creative discussion, developed a comprehensive strategic plan of specific objectives to define a great future for our City, called the Blueprint for A Better New Orleans. In 2000, a baseline poll, conducted by Silas Lee & Associates, noted that 98% of those residents polled viewed education as the "inextricable link to a better community". On this premise, the Committee For A Better New Orleans/Metropolitan Area Committee (CBNO/MAC), in 2001 determined education reform to be its number one priority.

Research on the state of the system produced information that was as shocking as it was disturbing. For instance, nine out of every 10 public schools (88%) in Orleans Parish are labeled "Academically Below the State Average". Sixty-four (64) of the district's 119 schools have performance scores below 45 and are on the State's watch list. The scores of fifty-three (53) of the schools declined in 2002 and of this group thirteen (13) of seventeen (17) high schools continue to decline.

Finger pointing rules the day. The State Board of Education (BESE) blames the Orleans Parish School Board; teachers blame the lack of discipline; principals blame the lack of administrative support; Board members blame poor management; management blames the lack of resources. Some voices from the community chide the teachers for excessive absenteeism and lack of interest. Some point out the lack of training for principals and administrators. Other voices condemn the School Board for excessive interference in hiring decisions and in the awarding of contracts. Most say that things would be different if we had more money.

Amid such conditions, it is difficult to hold on to hope that things will improve. Our community, harboring a paralyzing frustration about the demise of public education has opted to abandon ship and create the nation's highest percentages of private and parochially educated youth. Thus, the New Orleans Public

School System, arguably more than any other urban system, is left to battle the resulting effects of acute poverty, social service needs, behavioral challenges and an appalling lack of resources as they simultaneously attempt to adequately educate “every child”. But there is hope.

Following a series of citywide public forums at which on-site surveys were conducted, stakeholder meetings and discussions about the crisis of public education, six critical areas were identified:

- Obstacles to Teaching & Learning
  - SAFETY
  - ENVIRONMENT
  - LACK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
  - LACK OF RESOURCES/SUPPLIES
  
- Leadership & Administration
  - SCHOOL BOARD
  - INSTABILITY AT TOP MANAGEMENT LEVELS
  - CENTRAL OFFICE
  - LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY
  
- Professional Development & Training
  
- Lack of Community Support
  
- Impending Legislation
  
- LEAP Measurements of Accountability

CBNO/MAC acknowledges that the problem of public education is as multifaceted as the universe of solutions. In an effort to affect maximum change in the system, CBNO/MAC has taken a position on those areas, both immediate and long-term, that directly impact educational governance and administration. Understanding that the main objective is to improve the process of teaching and learning, it is believed that reforms in system governance do in fact speak directly to issues and obstacles of the classroom and therefore must be of paramount concern for this community. For far too long, criticism has been focused on defi-

ciencies of principals, teachers and students without a thorough analysis of the administrative and policy driven obstacles to achieving excellence in the classroom. This paper reflects this belief and, though it addresses many of the critical issues facing public education, it does not assert that CBNO/MAC has all of the answers to this issue. There is an acknowledgement that the solutions to many of the issues contained herein are better left to the experts. The sole purpose of this paper is to highlight the concerns voiced by the public through an open, public process and specifically state the organization's position on only those issues most critical to systemic transformation.

# Section I: Obstacles to Teaching and Learning

## **SAFETY & DISCIPLINE**

The daily plight of the Orleans Parish school student, which severely hinders the process of teaching and learning, involves both the threat of personal safety and constant disruptions. It is estimated that out of an entire 45-50 minute class period, approximately 15 minutes of actual instruction is achieved. The rest of the time is spent on administrative processes and more importantly, on controlling disruptions of behaviorally challenged students in the classroom. While there are a handful of schools within NOPS operating as alternative learning environments for long-term suspensions and expelled students, their capacity falls well short of the 7,000 slots needed for short and long-term placements. Orleans Parish is in dire need of a structured and systemized approach to dealing with behaviorally challenged students. This includes social service support, continued education & tutorial assistance and a smooth transition back into the general student populace.

CBNO/MAC has played a major role in the movement to establish an alternative learning environment for behaviorally challenged students who have been expelled or face long-term suspensions. Site visits and best practices research led the organization to recommend to the Orleans Parish School Board that it retain the services of Community Education Partners (CEP) in the establishment of just such a school, modeled after successful sites in both Philadelphia and Houston.

In both of these urban areas noted for innovative approaches to urban education, CEP has a proven track record of changing behaviors without sacrificing the education of the students. Attacking the problem on a large scale, the CEP model can accommodate up to 1000 students, but retains the “small environment” effect espoused by education experts through its “school within a school” approach. The compassionate teaching approach and on-site social service network within the school supports both educational and personal development of students entering the CEP model. Parents and education professionals in both cities, as well as those within CBNO/MAC, have expressed support for the CEP model and its effectiveness in enhancing the learning experience of the general student populace by reducing classroom distractions.

The School Board authorized the issuance of a Request For Proposals in 2002 and has taken no action in this regard since then. Since several service providers exist nationally, and the goal is to secure the best facility appropriate for

the needs of Orleans Parish students, CBNO/MAC urges the Board and the Superintendent to immediately start the formal competitive process to identify and select a service provider so that this school can become a reality and resource to the system in the near future.

In addition, CBNO/MAC will follow-through on its commitment to assist the Orleans Parish School system in identifying partners and seeking funds to facilitate and expedite an alternative school of this type, consistent with goal four of the education action plan in the Blueprint For A Better New Orleans.

Additionally, as in any urban school environment, the concerns of drug use and violence are constant. Currently, the school system utilizes New Orleans police officers to patrol its schools; however a growing desire on the part of the department to bring these officers back into the mainstream, may necessitate another solution. Social workers, probation and truancy officers and health professionals at the school site could greatly reduce the “non-academic” demands that are placed on the classroom teachers, freeing them to simply teach. CBNO/MAC echoes the sentiments of many educators and community leaders in supporting the privatizing of school security and in the integration of social service providers at individual school sites.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

It is not surprising to anyone who has visited or volunteered in a New Orleans Public School that only 3% of all total school buildings are considered to be in “good” condition. The rest, over 90%, are in deplorable condition, often without air conditioning or adequate heat. Aesthetically, these buildings are eyesores, and the effects of peeling paint, inadequately maintained stairwells and dilapidated, often inoperable bathrooms pose an even greater risk to the health of students and teachers alike. It is almost unimaginable that we would subject children to these conditions, but that is the daily reality and we go even further in our demand that they not only function under such conditions, but also learn. The subliminal message that is sent to these students only reinforces low self-esteem and detracts substantially from the value that should be placed on the learning process.

Now outdated estimate on the overall physical rehabilitation of Orleans Parish public schools was one billion dollars. Experts predict that this number has almost doubled and will continue to rise as major repairs and routine maintenance problems accumulate. The current budget of the system simply cannot accommodate these staggering estimates. It is incumbent upon the School Board and the new administration to develop a comprehensive, systematic plan to renovate or build schools. In order to guide the work process, the plan must include an updat-

ed facility analysis and budget, by site. Assuming a referendum will be needed, the public needs to be informed, consulted and reassured the funds will be spent as needed, within the timeframe(s) specified at the sites identified.

## **LACK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

In an initial survey of community based education stakeholders, the number one problem with the public school system was overwhelmingly determined to be a lack of parental involvement. For years, teachers and principals have felt the weight of having to not only teach their students, but in many cases, also take on parental responsibilities of counseling, discipline, teaching of social skills and often, emotional support. This assumption of non-academic responsibility characterizes the changing role of teachers and schools in today's urban environment and presents overwhelming obstacles to providing quality education.

Without question, schools having the benefit of strong parental and/or community involvement fare better than those that don't. However, the unfortunate reality is that many of the lowest performing schools simply do not have a wide parent base from which to pull support. Single parent households in which the parent is often working multiple jobs, guardian or custodial relationships in lieu of parents or parents who are not much older than their children often comprise the "parental involvement" pool from which these schools can pull from.

Today's urban school environment must, in many cases, provide support and services that are lacking in the home environment. Especially in New Orleans, CBNO/MAC believes it is clear that the traditional notions of parental involvement must change along with the expanded role the school system must assume relative to an integration of community resources and social services into the school site. In order for schools to provide a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning, CBNO/MAC believes that a parent liaison (program) is essential to ensuring that parents are involved - i.e. providing the parental support of ensuring a child does homework, attending teacher conferences and responding to other school or teacher requests. Additionally, parents being involved in the schools with creative and flexible tasks that demonstrate their value yet allow them to participate at a level most comfortable for them is essential - i.e. classroom reading, hall monitor, after school coach, parent counselor, cafeteria volunteer, etc. This, along with an integration of community resources, social services, and psychologists into the school site, teachers will be provided with greater measures of assistance and support within the classroom.

The Superintendent, in putting forth his reform initiatives, should utilize existing, recent studies, such as "Safe Schools Strong Children" conducted in

Central City, and community leaders who are willing to assist, to ensure that an effective, comprehensive plan of action is put in place to involve parents.

## **LACK OF RESOURCES/SUPPLIES**

No better example can be found of how administration, effective or ineffective, impacts what happens in the classroom. Each year, as school begins, principals and teachers are faced with the very real problem of not having adequate textbooks, supplies and computers for their students. To date, there has not been an assessment of how much money teachers and principals personally contribute to supplies and student readiness, but estimates range in the thousands of dollars overall. Oddly, studies indicate that by comparison, the per pupil expenditures of Orleans Parish are not out of line with those of comparable districts. This then becomes a question of the prudent distribution of resources across the district and within the actual school site. The Superintendent should use the fiscal audit to structure a better financial and resource management mechanism at both the central office and school site levels that becomes effective immediately in order to rectify these problems prior to the 2003 school year.

## Section II: Leadership and Administration

### **THE ORLEANS PARISH SCHOOL BOARD**

In a failing and declining school system, governance is a central issue. In-fighting amongst board members, tenuous relationships with BESE, from time to time, appallingly childish behavior by individual board members have caused the public to lose confidence in its elected board. A recent public opinion poll conducted by Silas Lee & Associates indicates that 47% of residents polled feel that the school board is doing a “poor” job of administrating the system, choosing micromanagement over policy development.

The sitting Board, despite its obvious stratification, has actually managed to make some very prudent decisions in recent months. Specifically, their decision to hire an experienced superintendent who not only has an extensive urban education background, but also has a proven track record of systemic turnaround should be applauded. With that one decision they have already made great strides in establishing the type of management stability that has been sorely lacking and will be addressed in the next segment of this paper.

Another very positive move by this Board came in the development and adoption of the Critical Action Plan for OPSS which has not only been well received locally, but at the state level as well. All indications point to the fact that this is a good foundation on which to build. However, there is still widespread skepticism over its implementation. Nevertheless, there is considerable hope that guided by the new superintendent, this plan will take the form of a strategic, goal-oriented accountability plan for the entire system. Once the Critical Action Plan is completed and accepted, the Superintendent must be given free reign to implement it, unhindered by self-interest and/or political agendas.

Should the Board remove itself from its former position of micromanagement to policy development, it must turn its attention inward and deal with some very pressing problems. At issue in particular is the lack of knowledge and expertise of the overall board in certain areas that are critical to sound decision making. The current budget crisis of the system in which recent audit reports show millions of dollars in overspending, is a case in point. Board members, lacking the skills and expertise necessary to navigate much of the administrative, legal and financial data of the system, are often unable to forecast and/or quickly identify problems before they become crises. Budget woes in particular speak to the need for the addition of skill specific representation to the current Board structure that

would ensure that decisions emanating from this body are made from a broader base of expertise and knowledge.

## **INSTABILITY OF TOP MANAGEMENT**

Directly underneath the school board lies a layer of management that has been characterized by instability of both personnel and policy. In the last decade and prior to the recent hiring of a new superintendent, the Orleans Parish School Board has had a total of nine superintendents. Out of those nine, only two were permanent hires as opposed to interim. Though the longevity of those two permanent superintendents exceeded their peers on a national level, a little over half of the decade was spent in an “interim” mode of operation that made it difficult to establish any type of administrative continuity and resulted in an a revolving door of middle to upper management. In stakeholder meetings with both principals and teachers, it is evident that there needs to be greater stability in policy and procedures. Having to change direction with every change of new guard has only compounded the difficulty of school sites to adequately implement ever-changing curriculum, accountability measurements, testing and personnel—again, a direct correlation between governance and administration and its impact on teaching and learning.

## **CENTRAL OFFICE**

The atmosphere of the OPSS Central Office has most frequently been characterized as “toxic”. Stakeholder meetings, focus groups and conversations with individuals on every level of the system indicate that the culture of central office is far from one of service provision. Instead it is a mass of bureaucracy and red tape that more often than not requires multiple requests for even the most basic of services, all without any guarantee of so much as a return call. As indicated above, constant turnover is partially to blame. However, it is also evident that a lack of leadership and adherence to policies and procedures already in place has cultivated an internal climate that recognizes no system of accountability and therefore, offers little hope for self-transformation. It is only recently, in discussions with school board members and the new superintendent, that the recognition of the need for standardized measures of accountability for the system are critical. Discussions about the shape and implementation of such strategies are already under way, but these standards will only be as strong as the public demand for accountability on all levels-accountability that must extend beyond the current superintendent and sitting board.

CBNO/MAC is encouraged by recent moves by the new Superintendent to reconfigure the central office. In a radical move that has been welcomed by those in and outside of the system, positions are being redefined and streamlined, cutting out much of the existing bureaucracy. Central to that reconfiguration is the downsizing of middle management and a return to having (4) area superintendents whose authority, responsibility and accountability will be clearly defined. This is without question, an important step in the right direction.

## **LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

At the heart of the problem of leadership and administration is a virtually non-existent system of accountability on any level. In particular, there is a critical need to create and maintain measurable standards of accountability to the public. The community is tired of the finger pointing. No matter the shape of the local governance structure—whether necessary services are provided from within the Orleans Parish School System or by outsourcing—the local community needs more understandable performance measures, in addition to standardized testing so it is better able to hold each component of the Orleans Parish School System more accountable than it has done previously. At present, the only performance measure left to the community is the LEAP test, which is not a sufficient measure to identify the performance failures on each level, i.e., governance, management, supervision, curriculum design, learning environment and teaching.

CBNO/MAC has researched the issue of accountability and has a plan in draft form, to be reviewed by the new Superintendent for his input and approval. Our plan will allow the local community to better assess the progress and accomplishment of its public education system and its leaders on a semi-annual basis. With the support of the Principal's Association of New Orleans and anticipated cooperation with the Superintendent, CBNO/MAC's subcommittee on accountability will work diligently to create and maintain new measurements of accountability, hire an outside evaluator to conduct the evaluation, monitor its implementation and report the findings to the general public semi-annually.

## Section III: Professional Development & Training

In a system where up to 40% of the teaching personnel is either not certified to teach or not certified to teach in their current subject area, the need for professional development of teachers is paramount. Ironically, comments at several of CBNO/MAC's public forums have evidenced the fact that experienced, certified teachers have in fact been turned away by the system and have found employment within the city's extensive network of private and parochial schools! The need to address this issue is perhaps one of the most important and immediate challenges for the new superintendent. Fortunately, help has taken the form of the Teach Greater New Orleans project that will, in partnership with the University of New Orleans, facilitate the recruitment and certification of new teachers and existing non-certified teachers, and offer greater incentive for certified teachers to obtain advanced degrees. CBNO/MAC supports the Teach Greater New Orleans as an effective and efficient program to recruit experienced leaders and community members to become trained and certified teachers. This is a model program that directly and positively impacts student achievement and sets a foundation for making education reforms and improvements take hold. This is an exciting development, long over due, and reflects the opportunities that exist by expanding the system's current outsourcing policies.

Additionally, there is great need for training in the areas of management and administration for both new and existing principals. Many principals view the current approach to principal orientation as "sink or swim" and have stated that being a good teacher does not necessarily translate into being a good administrator. This feeling is particularly acute at the level of lowest performing schools where principals find themselves with the greatest challenge to adequate resources and very little support. It is in these most needy of schools that the resources of the community are sorely needed in the form of volunteer assistance, both corporate and individual, but also in the counsel and support of principals, many of who lack management or administrative experience and have no recourse for proper training.

Finally, as evidenced by the inadequate oversight of the budget by the School Board, it is clear that training and development is needed on the board level as well. As with any corporate or non-profit board, the challenges of establishing policy versus the need to micromanage (and thus hinder) the administration needs to be clearly communicated to and understood by each board member. The board does have and should retain its very prominent role in the oversight of policy implementation and the performance of their top administrator; however the lines

of authority must be more clearly defined. This would facilitate shorter, more efficient meetings and quite possibly eradicate much of the public rage and resulting chaos that plays out at each board meeting. CBNO/MAC feels that, among other things, the administration must conduct an immediate examination of the current system of training and development for Board members, principals, and teachers, and the resources available to provide better training. PANOPSI and UTNO should be motivated to become involved in the development of a plan that addresses the specific needs of existing personnel in their respective positions, but also facilitates advance preparation for those who are subsequently promoted.

## Section IV: Lack of Community Support

While the community points its fingers at those within the system and assigns blame for the failure of our schools, it must also be conceded that the failure of this school system has been a steady decline that the public has allowed to continue for decades. As stated in the introduction, New Orleans has the highest percentage of students enrolled in the private and parochial systems, which vividly illustrates an abandonment of the public schools. It is not the failing of a particular superintendent or any one board, but the failure of the entire community not to demand accountability for the education of our city's children-children who in many respects are left alone and defenseless as they attempt to emerge from a system that has lost all perspective on what is really important.

Unfortunately, on those rare occasions when the community has come out en masse to offer help, as in the case of over 1500 volunteers being trained to provide LEAP tutoring, the capacity of the school system to accommodate large numbers of volunteers has been found to be woefully inadequate. It is problems like this, coupled with the paralyzing frustration of not being able to effect change, that has resulted in public apathy. However, if asked on the street about their feelings about the school system, the average citizen will more likely than not espouse a plethora of ideas, suggestions, disgust and outrage at the failings of the school system and its overall effect on every facet of our community. New Orleanians clearly have both a passion and a vision for positive change in our school system. Despite the negative ratings given to both the School Board and the system overall, almost 76% polled see some hope for change under Superintendent Amato's leadership. Surveys also indicate that overwhelmingly, when provided with more detailed information on the needs and challenges of the public schools, 53% said they were more likely to offer their assistance in the form of volunteerism. There is a great need to tap into this passion for transformation that lurks just below the surface of local residents, many of whom would probably return to the system if meaningful and lasting change could be achieved.

In a proactive effort to address this particular issue, CBNO/MAC has initiated discussions with other established community service organizations on the creation of a non-profit volunteer organization that would function as the liaison between the school system and the community. Operating in an outsourced

capacity, this independent agency will work with individual schools and their principals to determine areas of need and will then diligently work to plug the community into schools in the form of volunteers, donations, and administrative counsel and support.

## Section V: Impending Legislation

At a legislative briefing hosted by CBNO/MAC in March, one legislator was quoted as saying, “I’m not sure which bill I’m going to support, but I am going to support something-this has got to stop!” Those sentiments summarize the frustration felt by the Orleans delegation of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. In fact, it is clear that the rest of the state, viewing Orleans Parish as the anchor weighing down the rest of the state’s test scores, has unified to impose change on Orleans Parish. There are indications, however, that the Orleans delegation will be extremely influential in which forms of pending legislation are ultimately approved. At the briefing, CBNO/MAC received the clear message that local legislators were not only looking for change; they were looking for direction on which legislation to support. As a representative organization of the general public, the CBNO/MAC process did due diligence to its constituency by convening a series of public forums, stakeholder meetings and focus groups at which on site surveys on public education were collected. Additionally, a public opinion poll of 500 Orleans Parish residents was conducted by Dr. Silas Lee. This position paper and the results of both the survey and the public opinion poll will be forwarded to legislators in both houses of government to use as a guide in their decisions. More importantly, however, best practices research has been compiled on several forms of impending legislation. In providing information on the will of the people in the legislative process, CBNO/MAC is encouraged by the expressed support of the public on the following issues:

### **ALTERNATIVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE**

A majority of those surveyed in public forums indicated that a change at the School Board level would not only be welcome, but preferred. Almost 40% are in favor of either a fully appointed board or additional appointed members to the existing elected board. The State Legislative Task Force on Governance and Education has also recommended this option and has formally introduced it for consideration. Two school board members, representing OPSB on the LEGA Task Force, have publicly stated that they are not opposed to this option. There is still lingering skepticism about the political ramifications of appointed members to the board, but even greater apprehension about the threat of complete takeover if something is not done.

Protection of the constitutional right to vote has been at the center of much of this debate and overall, the Education Task Force and Board of Directors of

CBNO/MAC understand that it should be the people's right to elect their representatives. However, abysmal histories of board leadership and repeated campaigns to "Erase the Board" have only resulted in more of the same. This, coupled with the fact that an astonishing 87% of Orleans Parish residents polled felt that the School Board was doing only a poor to fair job of administration evidences the fact that something must change. Taking a cue from the public forum discussion and public opinion poll results, CBNO/MAC supports the concept of adding specific skill sets to enhance the capacity of the Orleans Parish School Board as well as business and parent representation, and therefore supports the addition of at least two appointed school board members to the existing elected board.

## **TAKEOVER OF LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

Though complete takeover of the school system is now unlikely in the wake of the hiring of Superintendent Amato, takeover of lowest performing schools appears to be infinitely more palatable, even preferable to 15% of people surveyed. There is an almost universal desire to bring immediate aid to those schools that are doing the worst and have the least resources. Currently, the proposed legislation would involve a takeover of a select group of lowest performing schools (yet to be determined) who would become part of a "recovery district" and whose management would then be outsourced. It needs to be noted that this piece of legislation would be statewide and therefore not require a local referendum.

There are national models to suggest that this form of takeover would not only benefit the recovery schools, but also the overall system. In New York City, the assumption of the City's lowest performing schools into a "Chancellor's District" yielded higher test scores and greater improvements on every level but the high school level. Additional research by Dr. Kenneth Wong of Vanderbilt University, a leading expert in the area of school reform, indicates that takeover models do indeed show incremental gains in all areas on the elementary and middle schools. Poll results indicate, however, that given the present responsibilities of Mayor Ray Nagin, citizens are not in favor of adding additional responsibility to the city's highest elected official. Understanding the great resources and expertise that will be required to make this option successful, CBNO/MAC supports the BESE takeover of lowest performing schools.

## Section VI: Future Research & Actions

### VOUCHERS

It is impossible to enter into any discussion about vouchers without touching on overarching issues of racism and economic discrimination. A poll done in the fall of 2002 by the Citizens For A Better Louisiana (CABL) showed that 58% of people statewide and in Orleans Parish supported the idea of vouchers for low-income families. When the same question was narrowed to African American respondents, support was still evident in a little over half of those polled. Similarly, the recent CBNO/MAC poll indicates that 55% either somewhat favor or strongly favor the idea of vouchers. Discussions on the issue indicate that the support expressed in the polls is less a result of staunch support of a voucher system itself and more of a desperate attempt to alleviate the suffering of even a handful of students who would actually be served by vouchers. Particularly in the case of African Americans, support for vouchers is an option of “last resort” that is met with equally committed opponents who believe that vouchers signal the beginning of the end for public schools.

The CBNO/MAC citywide public poll conducted by Dr. Silas Lee (April 2003) also reflects a split on the subject. 55% strongly/somewhat favor providing a voucher to parents. Yet these results are tempered by the fact that 41% strongly/somewhat oppose vouchers. Additionally, support and opposition is racially stratified. 50% of African-Americans strongly/somewhat favor vouchers compared to 47% of whites. Public school parents favor vouchers 57% to 41%. The strongest support by income was in households earning less than \$15,000 annually at 66% strongly/somewhat favor vouchers.

Two areas of consensus among supporters and opponents of vouchers are that (1) the people who will most be affected by its implications are the least educated about the concept and (2) that any system of vouchers will not in any way “fix” the system. An assessment of current voucher system models across the country provide little evidence of the overall success of vouchers. In fact, indicators are that, at best, they will offer a handful of families desperate to escape the public school system, an option to move their children into another educational system.

Philosophically, neither the public nor CBNO/MAC as an organization is supportive of any measures that further erode the resources of the public school system. Public schools are, by definition, the only school system in our society

that guarantees the education of “every child” and is an institution central to our national values and the common good. On the other hand, there is a recognition of and desire to alleviate the suffering of even a small number of families through school choice options. The question becomes, do current voucher proposals provide only a release valve for the intense pressure emanating from the system without threatening the demise of public education? Additionally, can the success of a school choice plan, devoid of LEAP testing as the accountability standard as is imposed on public schools, be evaluated fairly?

The conversation and perspective on this issue shifts when talking specifically about public schools and the dire situation in Orleans Parish. Should those students and their families be held hostage in order to give the new administration time to correct a highly dysfunctional system or do we offer an alternative?

Given this question, CBNO/MAC will support the use of school vouchers, on a limited basis, for students in Corrective Action II and III schools only, to determine the efficacy of school vouchers as a viable, interim approach to afford students, whose parents so choose, alternate options and relief from their present school situation. CBNO/MAC is not in favor of an open-ended voucher system that would drain finances and the student population and ultimately cripple the ability of the public school system to make itself whole. From a practical matter, there is in fact a limited capacity of both private and parochial schools to accept the thousands of students in Orleans Parish who will ultimately be eligible.

Schools that are ultimately eligible to accept vouchers should be currently in operation at the time the legislation is passed and provide evidence of student or school achievement consistent with state and/or national standards. New schools that may open subsequent to any legislation being passed should not be eligible and should not be able to use this situation as a means to “finance” private or parochial schools. Additionally, those schools accepting eligible students must also use a nationally accredited and standardized testing instrument to track and document student performance in the new environment so that BESE, parents and the community have a means for evaluation.

Certainly, a timeframe should be set for overall evaluation - i.e. to determine if students who have used vouchers are performing at an acceptable educational level and show evidence of consistent growth; if school ratings of those schools accepting vouchers have changed, decreased or remained the same; and if the Orleans Parish School System and students are showing evidence of improvement within the goals that are being set the new Superintendent and the standards set by BESE.

Pending these evaluations, it would then facilitate the public's ability to make a true determination on the real value of vouchers as an alternative option.

In the meantime, the leadership for the Orleans Parish School System, and this community, should understand the urgency of being focused and consistent and comprehensive in implementing reform and bringing student performance not just up to par, but to a competitive level consistent with global requirements. As was stated in the opening paragraph of this document - "education is the inextricable link to a better community". There's been a slow fuse burning for too many years and the fuse is getting shorter.

## **LEAP MEASUREMENTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

The offshoot of the voucher debate is the issue of educational accountability measurements, which for Louisiana takes the form of the LEAP test, annually administered to public school students in the 4th and 8th grade. Though public opinion poll results indicate that a full 73% feel that any voucher system passed must include the attachment of LEAP accountability, CBNO/MAC, recognizes that this is an effort to demand an "apples to apples" comparison on the voucher issue, rather than an affirmation of the validity of the LEAP standard. Currently, LEAP is used as the sole criterion for the advancement of 4th and 8th grade students, and as an accountability measurement weighing in at 60% of the overall school performance evaluation.

CBNO/MAC supports strong accountability systems to measure school and student performance. Nevertheless, CBNO/MAC has strong ideological opposition to LEAP as the standard of accountability as it is understood to be currently implemented and weighed.

CBNO/MAC will take a leadership role in the effort that many public school parents and educators have been fighting since its inception, in investigating and assessing the impact of LEAP. This includes its impact in Louisiana - on the individual student, its weight and impact in determining school or district scores and its impact on the African-American community. Additionally, this assessment will include a determination of LEAP's credibility in relation to other nationally accepted standardized measurement tests as well as how it fits federal requirements under "no child left behind". These findings will be utilized to determine if the use of LEAP is appropriate or if other or additional accountability measurements need to be considered.

At issue is the integrity of an accountability system that is critical in assessing the provision of quality education in public schools, but results in the penalization of individual students rather than the system. We can no longer continue

to victimize those that have been failed by the system. Having had time to assess the importance of accountability alongside the devastation of LEAP on the institutional psyche of the public school system, CBNO/MAC sees the issue of redefining the LEAP accountability system as the next issue of primary concern for this organization.

## Summary

The process of the CBNO/MAC Education Initiative has shown that there is not true public apathy on the subject of education. Rather, there exists a frustration so great that it has paralyzed the average citizen who no longer has confidence in individual ability to change the system. In fact, once the conversation begins, it is difficult to reign in the passion that overflows on this issue.

CBNO/MAC has endeavored to implement a process that addresses the critical issues facing the school system, provide a forum for discussion and solution oriented thinking, and most importantly, involve those stakeholders and members of the community whose voices are often ignored. Those in decision making positions can not decide the future of the Orleans Parish educational system without the involvement and consideration of those who will be most affected. The entire community has a stake in the educational system of Orleans Parish. It is the product of this system that fuels the workforce, social structure and ultimately, the economy this city. We can no longer afford to look the other way as children suffer and struggle to an adulthood devoid of hope and opportunity.

The decline in urban education in America is largely a factor of a collective refusal to acknowledge social change and make necessary adjustments. However, models of change are available to suggest that not only is change possible, it is probable when the will of the community overrides the establishment. Cities like Houston, Chicago, Charlotte, New York City and Atlanta, among a host of others, provide hope that an urban education can still be a good education and that meaningful reform can take place. The public school system has been and should continue to be, the cornerstone for educating every child and maintaining America's sense of democracy, freedom and opportunity. For New Orleans and over 67,000 students caught in the crossfire, the time for change is now. Let the transformation begin.

# Research Note

This CBNO/MAC Position Paper was compiled with assistance and information from a number of valuable resources, including the citizens of Orleans Parish.

Key documents used include: the CBNO/MAC Public Opinion Poll For Orleans Parish by Dr. Silas Lee April 2003; the On-Site CBNO/MAC Public and Stakeholder Forum Surveys November 2002 - March 2003; the CABL Statewide Survey on Education conducted by Ed Renwick September 2002; Orleans Parish School Board Critical Action Plan; “City and State Takeover as a School Reform Strategy,” July 2002 from ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education; “Mayoral Takeovers,” from the Michigan Education Association; “State Takeovers and Reconstitutions,” from the National Association of State Boards of Education; “Does School District Takeover Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of City and State Takeover as a School Reform Strategy,” 2001 by Dr. Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen; Fighting to Save our Urban Schools and Winning by Donald R. McAdams; and Making the Grade by Tony Wagner.

Other resources included: the Legislative Committee on Education Governance and Administration (LEGA); Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL); Orleans Parish School System; Orleans Parish School Board; Dr. Anthony Amato, Orleans Parish Superintendent of Schools; State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE); Dr. Peggy Kirby, University of New Orleans; Dr. Kenneth K. Wong, Vanderbilt University; Dr. Brian Riedlinger, School Leadership Center of Greater New Orleans; Dr. Cassie Freeman, Dillard University of New Orleans; Archdiocese of New Orleans; Principal’s Association of New Orleans; Metrovision School to Career Partnership; C.C. Campbell-Rock, Parents for Educational Justice; Metropolitan Area Leadership Forum; the Young Leadership Council; the Junior League and members of the Education Task Force and the Board of CBNO/MAC.

Committee For A Better New Orleans /  
Metropolitan Area Committee

## CBNO/MAC

909 Poydras Street  
Suite 1700  
New Orleans, LA 70112  
Tel: (504) 584-5019  
Fax: (504) 584-5077  
WWW.CBNO.ORG