

Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN)

Description of Citywide Engagement Project for the Future of Public Education

The purpose of this project is to convene a comprehensive, citywide process for the people of New Orleans to come together to develop a shared vision excellence and equity for public education. This process will begin with the most fundamental questions of what do we want public education in New Orleans to be and to do.

Few would dispute the notion that quality public education is the foundation upon which the future of New Orleans will be built. From high crime to a poverty economy, from struggling families to simple daily inefficiencies, the quality of life in the city is adversely impacted by the failure of public education over the past generations.

If New Orleans is to rebuild successfully – and indeed, not just to rebuild but to revitalize and to reclaim its place among the great cities of the world – it must design and implement a comprehensive, truly successful public education system. Consequently, OPEN feels that this project is quite likely the single most important long-term project being pursued in New Orleans at this time.

Key objectives of the Community Engagement Project include:

- I. Engage a broad cross section of the community in sustained dialogue and learning about the conditions, challenges, and possibilities regarding quality public education in New Orleans. This includes historical successes and failures in New Orleans as well as current best practices from around the world.
- II. Develop a common, community-wide definition of quality public education in New Orleans.
- III. Build the capacity of local residents and groups to collect and analyze data and make policy recommendations using a participatory research model. Residents will be engaged in identifying the information they need to be effective participants in this process; will help frame the research questions; and will participate in the research itself.
- IV. Develop a structure that will enable the community definition of quality public education to be delivered and sustained for every child in New Orleans.**
- V. Develop a permanent mechanism for ongoing community involvement in New Orleans public education, including continuing support for policies and programs that have shown significant, measurable improvement in the quality of public education.

One of the primary reasons the public school system in New Orleans pre-Katrina was among the worst in the United States was that large segments of the community had abandoned it completely. While there are many reasons for this, one of the many post-Katrina changes in New Orleans is that virtually everyone now recognizes that quality public education is essential to the city's future. However, this has not yet translated into community ownership of public education, though an encouraging sign is that four public education millages in a May 2008 election passed with 87% of the vote.

Given this situation, the fundamental premise of the OPEN project is that only by engaging the entire community in the development of a new public education structure can we sustain the reforms and the excellence that such a structure will provide. While understanding the need to provide the community with the information and tools it needs to make informed decisions, the fact remains that there is tremendous resident wisdom and understanding of how excellence and equity can be achieved in public education – and that any attempt to build a system only from the top down will not achieve the community support necessary for sustainability.

Key components of the Community Engagement Project include:

- I. Small group/focus group meetings with key leaders in all aspects of public education.
- II. Larger meetings with sets of stakeholders. Stakeholders include students, parents, teachers, administrators, government, the business community, the faith community, and nonprofits. A similar set of general community meetings will also be held, and a methodology will be developed to include displaced citizens as well. Each of these meetings will include a presentation on the history of New Orleans public education and how we got to where we are today. This will be followed by open discussion of the basic goals for and vision of public education in New Orleans. Major objectives of these meetings are to reach reasonable consensus on key components of the public education system (i.e., governance, facilities, curriculum, etc.) that need to be addressed as part of designing the new system; and to identify the information that citizens need to continue to engage in the overall process effectively.
- III. Simultaneous to the above, ongoing outreach to various education, organizing, community, grass-roots, and other groups that wish to participate in the project. This will expand the perspectives behind the project; involve more viewpoints in the design of the project as it goes forward; and greatly increase the capacity of the project to engage the full spectrum of New Orleanians in the community conversation.
- IV. Participatory research that will mine local, national and international resources to provide the information identified in item II above. The information will then be prepared and delivered to the community in ways that are accessible and usable going forward. The participatory research model will not only increase local capacity, it will add to the credibility of the research results within the community.
- V. Stakeholder and community meetings to provide the information, answer questions, and hold focused discussions on moving from vision to reality in achieving the community's goals for public education.
- VI. Development of a model (or models) for a public education structure. This stage will include all organizational partners, national experts and individual community members. In addition, all the education jurisdictions will be involved in the model development; this will help provide some reality-checking as well as facilitating buy-in from the powers with the responsibility for public education in the city and the state.
- VII. Presentation of the model to stakeholders and the community for discussion and refinement.
- VIII. Finalization of the model; comprehensive effort to implement systemic reform of public education in New Orleans to achieve excellence and equity.

Lastly, recent history has shown that the average term of an urban school district superintendent is less than three years. School boards are elected every four years. This creates a very difficult environment for stable leadership and policy-making, let alone sustaining a long-term focus on effective education policies and programs.

An organized, sustainable community group composed of school system clients, education policy makers, policy implementers, university leaders, faith leaders, business leaders and community members could bridge the institutional changes and provide the needed stability and long-term focus. In the latter stages of the project, development of such a group will become an additional component.