

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 1: Rebuilding a Shattered System

Airdate: October 2, 2007

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: This is New Orleans, just two years after Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding devastated the city and its school system.

PAUL VALLAS, Superintendent, New Orleans Recovery School District: If you set the bar high, the higher you set it, the higher the schools are going to perform.

JOHN MERROW: Residing over this emerging sense of optimism is Paul Vallas, the new superintendent of schools.

PAUL VALLAS: So, you know, you want to become a civil rights leader, become a teacher. You want to get involved in the greatest, the greatest chapter in the American civil rights movement, dedicate yourself to the education of our young people.

JOHN MERROW: New Orleans has become a magnet for idealistic educators. This year, the district hired about 500 new teachers from around the country.

PAUL VALLAS: God knows we've got the superior teachers, do we not?

JOHN MERROW: Among the new teachers listening to their new leader were Jake Kuhnline and Kady Amundson of Rabouin High School.

KADY AMUNDSON, Teacher, Rabouin High School: I love the energy of today. I love the fact that everybody is really, really positive about what we can do in New Orleans.

JAKE KUHNLINE, Teacher, Rabouin High School: What he brings is high expectations, of course, but also a sense of urgency. You can hear it in his voice.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas comes to New Orleans after running two large city school systems, Chicago, with 414,000 students, and Philadelphia, with 172,000. Even before Katrina, New Orleans had only 62,000 students.

PAUL VALLAS: I think I've had a pretty good track record of success. And I think, given the fact that this district is much smaller, I'm confident that we can transform the system.

Past successes for Vallas

JOHN MERROW: In Chicago and Philadelphia, Vallas is credited with raising test scores and standardizing the curriculum.

MICHAEL CASSERLY, Council of the Great City Schools: I think he's been a real asset to urban public education around the country.

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JOHN MERROW: Mike Casserly's organization represents the largest school districts in the country. He urged Vallas to take the New Orleans job.

MICHAEL CASSERLY: Frankly, I was thrilled that somebody of his caliber, his energy, his intelligence, and his ability to marshal resources from around the country would take a job in a system that has as many challenges as that one does.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Pastorek, Louisiana's new state superintendent of education, hired Vallas to run what is called the Recovery School District, made up of 26 charter and 34 traditionally run schools. The state controls these schools, not the city.

PAUL PASTOREK, State Superintendent of Education, Louisiana: I mean, the reason why Paul Vallas is here is because he is employing a Peace Corps-like mentality. He doesn't need to be here. He can go off and do something that's much more financially lucrative. But I think he fundamentally wanted to come here so that he could do good.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas has his detractors. Some feel he left Philadelphia in a shaky financial condition; others wonder about a non-New Orleans native coming in to lead a community that is skeptical of outsiders.

PAUL PASTOREK: This community sort of treats outsiders like antibodies and rejects them at will. And so one of the reasons why Paul was a particularly attractive candidate is because he's really quite capable of engaging with the local community.

JOHN MERROW: Is there a concern that he'll be perceived as the knight on the white horse riding in to save New Orleans?

PAUL PASTOREK: I had a number of concerns about Paul coming to the community, knight on a white horse is one of those. A white knight on a white horse was another.

The African-American community wants a superintendent who cares, who's committed, who's willing to work hard, and who's willing to immerse himself into the community. And if you're willing to do that, the community doesn't care if you're white, black, doesn't -- what's the old Chinese proverb? It doesn't matter whether or not the cat is white or black, but whether or not it can catch mice.

Huge challenges in New Orleans

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas faces huge challenges. In many ways, the schools are academically bankrupt. On one state test, 80 percent of high school students scored below basic in math, 88 percent below basic in English. The vast majority of students live in poverty. Many arrive at school hungry. And New Orleans itself is still struggling to recover.

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Schools around the district were in various states of disrepair. Some were so badly damaged in the storm that they may never reopen. Repairs on schools that could be salvaged were often moving slowly, meaning that students and teachers will spend at least part of the year in alternative facilities.

Despite all of these problems, Vallas is upbeat.

PAUL VALLAS: You know, I think we can start seeing results within the next year or so. I mean, I'm that optimistic. I've actually prepared a checklist that we're giving to all the teachers and the parents the first week of school.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas' checklist includes: well-maintained, air-conditioned classrooms; modern textbooks; low student-to-teacher ratios; revamped curriculum and frequent testing to measure student improvement; hot lunches and functioning bathrooms; and technology in every classroom, including free laptops for every high school student.

ADRIENELL BOYD, Principal, Rabouin High School: For those of you that had the chance to walk around the school, I want you to note that we have had a bombardment of technology in the classroom.

JOHN MERROW: At Rabouin High School, Principal Adrienell Boyd is carefully monitoring Vallas' checklist.

ADRIENELL BOYD: As an educator for the past 14 years, I've heard it all. I've heard promises being made and nothing being the result. Superintendent Vallas is promoting technology in the classrooms. It's here. He's saying every classroom will be painted before students actually come into the school. That is being done. He really has come in with everything that he's promised.

JOHN MERROW: Rabouin teachers were also keeping tabs.

JAKE KUHNLINE: I still have three windows that are broken, but the school has put that on like their hot list. They should be replaced by September 4th when school starts. So I'm fully confident that they will be, because everything that has been told to me so far that will be done has been done.

AMANDA SIAS, Teacher, Rabouin High School: I'm skeptical.

JOHN MERROW: Amanda Sias has her doubts, particularly about Vallas' plan to distribute laptops to all high school students.

AMANDA SIAS: I mean, I heard him say, "Every kid is going to get a computer." And I'm like, "Does he really know what type of kids we're dealing with?" "Johnny, where's your

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computer?" "Oh, I got jacked last night, and somebody took my computer." We're going to have to deal with the logistics of it every day, and he won't.

Some teachers express skepticism

JOHN MERROW: You're saying Paul Vallas is naive?

AMANDA SIAS: He's bright-eyed. And I know he's been successful in other places that were failing, but New Orleans is a -- it's a totally different ballgame.

PAUL VALLAS: I suggest that that teacher look for another school district, because that's the exact low expectations that we set for inner city kids. When you raise expectations, people say you're being naive. But it's like, what comes first, the chicken or the egg? What comes first, the low performance or the low expectations?

AMANDA SIAS: There's a difference between low expectations and reality.

JOHN MERROW: What's the effect, Kady? You know, listen to a skeptic, maybe even a cynic, is that going to hurt you and your idealism?

KADY AMUNDSON: I think he just always has to have kind of one foot in an element of just what's realistic, and you have to have the other foot in like what the ideal is and what you want your students to be able to do, where you want them to go.

JOHN MERROW: Sixteen of Rabouin's teachers, nearly half the staff, are brand-new, members of groups like Teach NOLA or Teach for America, both Peace Corps-like organizations.

PAUL VALLAS: I'm a big fan of the Teach for America program. What they bring to the classroom is tenacity, mastery, enthusiasm, an unbelievable work ethic, very high expectations for kids, high expectations for success. They really commit themselves and throw themselves into the job.

JASON DENLINGER, Teacher, Rabouin High School: It excites me. I've actually picked up a lot of energy from Kady and Jake and some of the other teachers I've been working with just before school starts. I mean, I'm fairly young and new myself, but I've kind of just fed off them a little bit.

JOHN MERROW: But some veterans are betting that the young teachers will not last.

AMANDA SIAS: There's a pool going around.

JASON DENLINGER: What?

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AMANDA SIAS: There's a pool.

JASON DENLINGER: You're kidding, right?

AMANDA SIAS: No. I mean, it's not official. But, I mean, it's been talked about. I'm not involved in it yet, but, I mean, I want to make some money.

JASON DENLINGER: So what are your bets on me?

AMANDA SIAS: Oh, you got it. You're here.

JOHN MERROW: As opening day approached, everyone seemed to be working around the clock.

TEACHER: Where do you want this?

PAUL PASTOREK: Well, on the opening of facilities, I'm confident that they will, because I just ordered up 40 more electricians to go work on the job site for the next 48 hours to make sure it opens. And it will.

Problems on the first day

JOHN MERROW: On opening day, the schools were in the spotlight. When students arrived, the technology was in place, the classrooms had been painted, and the textbooks were on hand. But there were problems.

PAUL VALLAS: We have a lot of people coming in at the last minute to register, or I should say coming in and registering today. In fact, there's a line wrapped around the building.

ANDREA SCOTT, Parent: I'm here to register my son, because I want him to go to Rabouin. They told me Rabouin was full. I went to try to put him in (inaudible) so right now I've been getting the runaround.

JOHN MERROW: Although registration was high, actual attendance on opening day was disappointingly low across the district. About 40 percent of the 13,000 registered students did not show up. And at many high schools, a new computerized scheduling system led to chaos. Rabouin High School was no exception.

JAKE KUHNLINE: A lot of confusion with scheduling.

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AMANDA SIAS: If a kid was in the 10th grade last year, it gave him the same 10th grade schedule again today.

ADRIENELL BOYD: We realized that students were placed in classes that they already passed the previous school year.

JASON DENLINGER: Students were kind of all over the place, just because of not knowing where to go, teachers not even sure where they're supposed to go.

KADY AMUNDSON: everyone kept coming in and saying, "I have your class, I have your class, I have your class." And I'm thinking, how in the world do I have 40 kids that have biology fifth period?

AMANDA SIAS: I'm a veteran teacher of 10 years. If I were a first-year teacher, I wouldn't come back tomorrow.

JOHN MERROW: In fact, one new teacher left Rabouin after just one week. And Jake's windows?

JAKE KUHNLINE: The broken windows are still broken, and they're still not fixed. But I have them covered in cardboard, so we can make do for now. It still is the Recovery School District, and there are still kinks that need to be worked out. And it's not perfect yet, but tomorrow will be better.

JOHN MERROW: Repairing buildings may be the easiest challenge that Paul Vallas faces.

PAUL VALLAS: So you all going to help me this year? I didn't hear you. Are you all going to help me this year? Let's hear it. You all going to help me this year? Work really hard. God bless you all, and I'll be seeing you real soon.