

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 3: Curbing the Dropout Rate

Airdate: February 8, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: School Superintendent Paul Vallas is making big changes in New Orleans.

PAUL VALLAS, superintendent, Recovery School District: We need to move now. We need to start building buildings now. We need to modernize those classrooms now. Let's work to get this quick start process going.

JOHN MERROW: Tearing down this school, abandoned since Hurricane Katrina, is just part of Vallas' plan. He's promising that, by next summer, this site and four others will have brand-new schools.

These changes can't come fast enough for Vallas' boss, State Superintendent Paul Pastorek.

PAUL PASTOREK, Louisiana state superintendent: We haven't had such construction in public schools in the city of New Orleans in the last 18 years. This is a real remarkable moment.

JOHN MERROW: Tearing down old buildings and putting up new ones? That may be the easiest part of Paul Vallas' job. The real work is here in the classroom, where you can't just start over.

Here, Paul Vallas has to meet students where they are. And in New Orleans, most of them are well behind.

Brittne Jackson is no exception.

BRITTNE JACKSON, senior, Rabouin High School: I'm 19. I've been a senior -- this is my third year as a senior.

JOHN MERROW: Like Brittne, many high school students in Vallas' Recovery School District are at least one grade behind.

BRITTNE JACKSON: I always had the D's and F's, because I didn't want to go to class, and I didn't want to do nothing.

Seeking out enthusiastic teachers

JOHN MERROW: Students who were behind are at a much higher risk of dropping out. Last year across the district, only 39 percent of seniors received high school diplomas.

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PAUL VALLAS: Because they've never studied hard enough to do well in high school, because there's no incentive to do well in high school, since they're not college bound, so they think, "Well, I've got to work. I've got to go get a job."

JOHN MERROW: Brittne left school last year for a job at this grocery store. But when she gave a customer too much change and ended the day with her register short, it opened her eyes.

BRITTNE JACKSON: I have to go back to school in order to get that education that I needed. You know, I can't give the wrong amount of change. I would have got fired from work. So I was like, "All right, so either I'm going to go to school or I ain't going to work nowhere, because I can't count."

JOHN MERROW: Brittne re-enrolled in October, but she's had a hard time making it to school every day. She recently took a second job to save money for a car and is now working 70 hours a week.

KADY AMUNDSON, teacher, Rabouin High School: We've got to catch you up because you weren't here yesterday.

JOHN MERROW: Biology teacher Kady Amundson has taken it upon herself to tutor Brittne.

KADY AMUNDSON: ... the probability? It will be two over four. And two over four is what, simplified?

BRITTNE JACKSON: Zero-point-five?

KADY AMUNDSON: It's point-five, right?

Brittne is really bright. She's a student that I really want to see graduate, and so I'm definitely invested.

JOHN MERROW: Kady is a first-year teacher, one of hundreds of recent college graduates who Paul Vallas sought out to transform his schools.

PAUL VALLAS: We've got teachers every day that, despite the obstacles and despite the real or perceived lack of supports, they're out there, they're doing their job, teachers who are enthusiastic, teachers who are committed, and teachers who are willing to come in early in the morning and leave late at night.

TEACHER: What I want you to do is summarize the definition.

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Coping with violence

JOHN MERROW: But the problems are overwhelming. Many students have been left back; others who should have been left back have been promoted.

Today, 85 percent of students across the district are performing below grade level.

PAUL VALLAS: This is a very tough job. This is a very tough environment. We're educating kids that are way behind. All the kids, all the kids are at least one, two, three years below grade level. I mean, that's a real challenge.

JOHN MERROW: In this city, the stakes could not be higher.

KADY AMUNDSON: New Orleans is a very violent city, and a lot of the things that kids who don't have high school diplomas fall into are deadly here. It's not just trouble. It sounds dramatic, but it's kind of life or death.

JOHN MERROW: On January 12th, a 10th-grader was shot and killed on a street corner two days before his 17th birthday. Paul Vallas attended the funeral.

PAUL VALLAS: There's drug deals going on, drive-by shootings. The violence that we face in our communities is tied to poverty, and educational failure, and things of this nature.

HELEN MILLER, parent: This is the Ninth Ward. This is the Ninth Ward area. Here in the Ninth Ward, we have a lot of peer pressure. We have a lot of kids that don't go to school.

I say it's almost 6:30. Go finish getting ready for school.

JOHN MERROW: Helen Miller, a single mother of five, knows firsthand how crucial it is for her children to graduate.

HELEN MILLER: I'm afraid that my son is going to end up as a statistic, dropped out, on drugs, selling drugs or dead, because the average young guy around here has been in jail numerous times. I don't want to see Antoine that way.

JOHN MERROW: Her 16-year-old son, Antoine Duplessis, has a history of getting in trouble on the street and at school.

ANTOINE DUPLESSIS, eighth grader, Booker T. Washington School: One time, I walked into school at 8 o'clock, and I got kicked out of class at 8:29. I got sent home.

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JOHN MERROW: Antoine, who's old enough to be in 11th grade, is way behind. He's in eighth grade. As an eighth-grader, he'd normally attend this school with his 13-year-old sister.

HELEN MILLER: I don't want my 16-year-old in an elementary school with my 13-year-old. He's too old; he's too big. I don't want any 16-year-olds in the school with my little 13-year-old. That's how things happen.

Alternative schools for older kids

JOHN MERROW: Vallas agrees. That's why Antoine is a student here at Booker T. Washington, a special school Vallas set up for over-aged eighth-graders.

PAUL VALLAS: It would make sense to put the 16- and 17-year-olds, who are reading at the fourth-grade reading level, to ability group them rather than to keep a 16- and 17-year-old in a fifth- or sixth- or seventh-grade class.

JOHN MERROW: At Booker T., most of the day is spent preparing students for the mandatory state LEAP test, which they must pass to move on to the ninth grade. But teaching to students who have failed repeatedly presents its own set of problems.

JEFFREY BERMAN, teacher, Booker T. Washington School: A lot of students tend to get jaded. They've experienced failure for so many times that there's a point of where you just accept it's not worth even trying.

So alliteration, like I said, it's a poetic device. It repeats the same beginning.

JOHN MERROW: Jeffrey Berman is Antoine's English teacher.

JEFFREY BERMAN: So, "Marvelous Mary made magnificent mudpies." They all start with M, right? All right, I want you guys all -- I want you all to make one for yourselves.

It's hard to get this age group interested in material that is traditionally intended for possibly a younger audience. That's probably the biggest challenge is getting them interested in the stuff that normally, like, they might give the response, "this is baby stuff. Why am I given this?"

ANTOINE DUPLESSIS: Active Antoine auditioned all day and all night.

JEFFREY BERMAN: Active Antoine auditioned all day and all night. That's perfect. I like it.

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JOHN MERROW: Teachers also complain they're not equipped to teach students who are so far behind.

LUKE STRATTNER, teacher, Booker T. Washington School: I teach math for kids who are on, like, first- through third-grade level, but I have eighth-grade books, and those are the only books I have. Well, these kids aren't anywhere close to eighth grade. There's this big gap of knowledge. So if I had fifth-grade books, fourth-grade books, you know, I might be able to handle it a lot better.

STUDENT: Three times two is six.

Facing the challenges ahead

JOHN MERROW: First-year math teacher Luke Strattner says students and teachers have concerns about the purpose of Booker T.

LUKE STRATTNER: Most of the students here say this is just a prison, a detention center, and they don't look at it like this is a school. Sometimes it feels like they just put all the kids who are trouble to other schools here.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas denies that Booker T. is a warehouse for failing students. For one thing, he says, given the number of kids who are behind in the district, it's too small.

PAUL VALLAS: It's kind of hard to do when 85 percent of your kids are two years or more below grade level, so, you know, you have to exile a lot of kids.

TEACHER: Andre, come here, Andre. No, come here, Andre. You're taking a quiz.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas says he's aware of the problems with the school, and so he's hired a private company, Camelot, to help run Booker T. Camelot currently runs educational programs in eight states. While he was superintendent in Philadelphia, Vallas contracted with the company to run three alternative schools there.

PAUL VALLAS: Camelot will do a far superior job than this district has ever done managing a very challenged population. They have a whole instructional strategy that's designed to address the economic deficiencies that the children experience.

JOHN MERROW: For students in traditional schools who need to catch up, Vallas has added an after-school program called Credit Recovery.

PAUL VALLAS: You know, you can't end the school day at 3:15 and expect to close the gap when you've got kids who are two, three, four years below grade level. It's impossible to do.

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JOHN MERROW: But on the days we visited, the after-school classes were mostly empty. Vallas says it's still early and that problems will be solved, but will changes come soon enough for Antoine? He worries that his temper could erupt any time, leaving him out on the street again, expelled from school.

ANTOINE DUPLESSIS: All I could say is, I hope I can stay in school. I'm going to try my best to stay in school. But if anything happened, like somebody do me something, I can't change the way I would react. I'm going to react the same way any time.

JOHN MERROW: According to his English teacher, Antoine hasn't been in class since just before the winter break.

Brittne Jackson is still in school, but she's worried. The exit exam she must take to graduate is given in February. She's already passed math and English, but the science section has given her trouble.

BRITTNE JACKSON: I think I took this test 14 times and failed it. I don't know if it's my test-taking skills or is it that I freeze up when I take the test? But I don't understand how I just -- you know, how a person could fail their LEAP test all those times.

JOHN MERROW: Faced with all of these challenges, even Paul Vallas sometimes has bad days.

PAUL VALLAS: If I'm having a bad day, it's usually for a good reason, and that just means I have to intensify my efforts. We've got a steep hill to climb. You know, also, we are moving fast. We're moving fast because there is a sense of urgency here.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas' plans for next year are already taking shape. The school day will be longer for all students, and Vallas will open a privately run network of schools for over-aged students and those with behavioral problems.

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