

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans
Episode 4: Struggling to Bolster Schools
Airdate: April 3, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

PAUL VALLAS, superintendent, New Orleans Recovery School District: We don't want to lose a single student.

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour correspondent: From the moment school superintendent Paul Vallas arrived in New Orleans last July, he's been selling his vision of the future.

PAUL VALLAS: All the schools in the entire system will begin their day next year at 8:00 and they'll go to 4:30. All of our eighth- and ninth-graders will be in school year-round.

JOHN MERROW: With a mandate to turn around the Recovery School District, basically the city's worst schools, Paul Vallas is planning a massive redesign of the district's high schools.

PAUL VALLAS: We cannot afford anything less than excellence.

All the high school principals know that, beginning next year, their schools are going to begin their transition to the future, so to speak.

JOHN MERROW: Rabouin is Vallas' largest high school, where only 50 percent of seniors graduated last year.

PAUL VALLAS: The plan here is to transition Rabouin into an international high school with a very large international baccalaureate program.

JOHN MERROW: But at Rabouin, teachers have been too busy dealing with day-to-day concerns to spend much time thinking about Vallas' grand plans.

TEACHER: He's on my schedule somewhere. Wait a minute.

JOHN MERROW: Scheduling problems at the beginning of the school year left students in the wrong classes well into October.

RACHEL HAMMER, teacher, Rabouin High School: Students would just be walking up and down the hallway like during class, so it was just a lot of traffic. It was like a circus.

JOHN MERROW: Rachel Hammer is a first-year science teacher.

RACHEL HAMMER: I had several moments of crying and weeping in front of my class and being like, "You do not deserve this." It was just this really tense environment, and morale was just plummeting.

Evaluating administrators

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 4: Struggling to Bolster Schools

Airdate: April 3, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW: By January, conditions showed little improvement. A deputy from the district paid a routine visit to Rabouin to check in on the school.

RACHEL HAMMER: They sent an RSD lady over to talk to the teachers and just kind of survey morale, to ask us some questions. And I remember she came into my fourth period, this period, and was just kind of like, "Hey, real quick, just give me one to five, what do you think about these administrators?"

When she came in, I just got big tears in my eyes, and I was like, "Where have you been? I'm really thankful to answer these questions. I'll give you the numbers for my administration, but it is January. We've been suffering for, like, months."

JOHN MERROW: The performance of Rabouin's rookie principal, Adrienell Boyd, came under scrutiny.

ADRIENELL BOYD, principal, Rabouin High School: I'm never comfortable about my job security simply because there's this underlying current, "The principal is the first to go." And I cannot think of any other career besides principals and football coaches that you choose and then you can be here today and gone today.

So we had a lot of schedule changes take place, but thank you for your patience.

PAUL VALLAS: We're going to assess whether or not we need to make leadership changes. You know, everybody's being evaluated, make no bones about it.

Addressing behavioral problems

JOHN MERROW: But Rabouin wasn't the only troubled school on Vallas' radar. To handle a growing population of what are called "overage underachievers," Vallas set up a special school for eighth-graders who've been repeatedly held back.

But just like Rabouin, Booker T. Washington was plagued by problems and would require extra attention.

PAUL VALLAS: The greatest challenge we face is the fact that our kids are so old, so much older than they should be at that grade level, and so far behind.

TEACHER: The test that you're going to take today, tomorrow, and Friday is like a pre-LEAP test. Take it very seriously.

JOHN MERROW: At Booker T., most of the day is supposed to be spent preparing students to take the mandatory state test called LEAP, which they must pass to move onto high school. However, rampant behavioral problems disrupted students and teachers alike.

Learning Matters, Inc.

6 e. 32nd St. 8th Floor / New York, NY / 10016

212.725.7000 / news@merrow.org / www.pbs.org/merrow

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 4: Struggling to Bolster Schools

Airdate: April 3, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

TEACHER: Go on. Keep clowning. You're going to have that same seat next year.

TEACHER: You're not taking the quiz. Bring me your quiz. No, bring me your quiz.

TEACHER: You come to class, falling asleep, not paying attention, taking things for a joke. That's not the way to be successful.

JOHN MERROW: Dale Bowers (ph) is a first-year math teacher.

TEACHER: And I've got a class full of 26 to 28 students, and only one or two are really interested in learning.

TODD BOCK, vice president for public education, Camelot: We found a school that was in crisis.

A stricter school environment

JOHN MERROW: In December, Paul Vallas brought in Camelot, a private alternative education provider to help manage Booker T. Washington.

Todd Bock is vice president of education services for Camelot.

TODD BOCK: Our focus in the first phase of our being involved at Booker T. Washington was to begin to establish a culture so that learning can take place, so we focused a lot of our attention in behavior management and supporting teachers in the classroom so that they can give instruction and kids can receive that instruction.

JOHN MERROW: Camelot established firm rules. It posted personnel throughout the school and limited movement in the hallways.

LUKE STRATTNER, teacher, Booker T. Washington School: At first, they tried an approach of, like, really aggressive and, like, getting in kids' faces.

JOHN MERROW: Luke Strattner teaches math at Booker T.

LUKE STRATTNER: I think they realized that that's not going to be the way to get to them. And since then, they've kind of backed off. So I think now they're trying to get to know the students and take a different approach.

TODD BOCK: Some kids would say, "Well, it's a lot stricter than it was before." And to me, that's a positive thing. Strict is good. It's not easy to be told you're 16 years old and you're still in the eighth grade. And these kids have courage for showing up everyday.

Learning Matters, Inc.

6 e. 32nd St. 8th Floor / New York, NY / 10016

212.725.7000 / news@merrow.org / www.pbs.org/merrow

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 4: Struggling to Bolster Schools

Airdate: April 3, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

We're talking about many years of under-performance from students that isn't going to be changed in two or three months or maybe even in the school year.

TEACHER: We're getting there. Rome wasn't built in a day.

TODD BOCK: Today's our 42nd day.

JOHN MERROW: Although Vallas is willing to be patient, he expects results.

TEACHER: Forty-two days.

PAUL VALLAS: Let's see what happens at the end of the year. You know, it's a performance-based contract. If they don't perform, they will not stay.

Replacing principals, teachers

JOHN MERROW: Back at Rabouin, where troubles had simmered all year long, Vallas decided it was time to remove the principal, Adrienell Boyd.

PAUL VALLAS: You know, I just felt that she was a bit overwhelmed. Rabouin is a tough school. And so the feeling here was the school was not going to get better under the current leadership.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas replaced Boyd with Rabouin's assistant principal, Mavia Marsalis.

MAVIA MARSALIS, assistant principal, Rabouin High School: Young man, tuck that shirt in, please.

PAUL VALLAS: The assistant principal is dynamic, and charismatic, and a strong leader, and people had a lot of confidence in her ability.

MAVIA MARSALIS: Didn't I tell you I needed to see you?

STUDENT: Yes.

MAVIA MARSALIS: So you're going to see me today?

STUDENT: Yes.

MAVIA MARSALIS: I'm not going to chase you.

STUDENT: All right.

Learning Matters, Inc.

6 e. 32nd St. 8th Floor / New York, NY / 10016

212.725.7000 / news@merrow.org / www.pbs.org/merrow

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 4: Struggling to Bolster Schools

Airdate: April 3, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

RACHEL HAMMER: Since the principal has left, the new principal has been really strict, much more strict with the policies. And when she says something, she means it. And that, I've found, is so refreshing.

MAVIA MARSALIS: Young people, let's go.

JOHN MERROW: The big changes at Rabouin and Booker T. Washington may reveal something about Paul Vallas' plans for the rest of the district.

Do you anticipate replacing a lot of your existing principals?

PAUL VALLAS: Well, I don't know if I anticipate replacing a lot, but we'll probably replace some. You know, I'm not going to parade out principals or teachers or give you a body count. You need to be careful that you're not grandstanding and that you're not alienating your rank-and-file.

JOHN MERROW: But if I'm a teacher working for you, should I be nervous about my job?

PAUL VALLAS: Well, if you have problems of poor absenteeism, poor attendance, if you have a low expectation for children, if you're showing up at school five minutes before the school day begins and you're leaving school five minutes after the school day ends, I think you should probably be a little nervous.

JOHN MERROW: Having arrived with grand visions, Paul Vallas has learned that, in New Orleans, change happens one small step at a time.

Learning Matters, Inc.

6 e. 32nd St. 8th Floor / New York, NY / 10016

212.725.7000 / news@merrow.org / www.pbs.org/merrow