

**LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**

**Paul Vallas in New Orleans**

**Episode 5: Targeting Young Readers**

**Airdate: June 17, 2008**

**TRANSCRIPT**

TEACHER: Give yourselves a big round of applause.

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Correspondent: In May, New Orleans' troubled Recovery School District was celebrating.

TEACHER: You guys having fun?

STUDENTS: Yes!

TEACHER: We're about to have a ton of fun. Can you guys handle it?

STUDENTS: Yes!

JOHN MERROW: After a long first year, Superintendent Paul Vallas had something to boast about.

PAUL VALLAS, Superintendent, Recovery School District: We went up in every grade, in every subject, and we outperformed everyone else in growth. Congratulations.

JOHN MERROW: The result of the state-mandated assessment tests put Vallas' district in the national spotlight.

PAUL VALLAS: If you look at the test scores across the board, both fourth grade, eighth grade, and high school, there was improvement across the board.

JOHN MERROW: But even in the midst of celebration, Vallas reminded his audience there was much to be done.

PAUL VALLAS: The sobering note is test scores are very, very low still, despite the growth, and that we have an incredibly long way to go.

JOHN MERROW: Raising those scores is the goal of Vallas' reforms. With a majority of students performing well below grade level, Vallas spends most of his time playing catch-up.

PAUL VALLAS: Only 40 percent of the kids at the high school level are still passing the graduate exit exam on the first run.

JOHN MERROW: Problems for older students can be traced back to early elementary grades, something Vallas is well aware of.

PAUL VALLAS: I'm a big believer that early intervention and early literacy, early numeracy can translate into dramatic improvement.

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STUDENT: What book are we reading in reading this week?

#### Success with emphasis on reading

JOHN MERROW: That made us curious. What's happening in first grade? After all, the early grades form the foundation for learning.

Are first-graders in New Orleans learning to read? Because if they aren't, then Vallas and whoever succeeds him are destined to play catch-up forever.

We decided to check out some first-grade classrooms for ourselves. Benjamin Banneker Elementary School is one of a handful of schools not damaged by Hurricane Katrina and the flooding.

ELIZABETH HOLLOWAY, Teacher, Banneker Elementary School: Can you use that word, "nothing," in a sentence?

JOHN MERROW: We went into Elizabeth Holloway's first-grade class. Holloway has been teaching for eight years, but this is her first experience teaching first-graders how to read.

ELIZABETH HOLLOWAY: Reading was something that always frightened me a little bit because it is such a responsibility, but I've been finding my way along.

What's the short sound for I? What's that short sound? Do it again. One more time. The long sound for I?

I don't know that everyone could teach reading. To be a teacher, you need to be able to assess where the children are, and know where you're headed, and also to look at yourself and say, "OK, what can I do to help them move along?"

JOHN MERROW: Ms. Holloway let me lead the class for a few minutes.

Guys, girls, boys and girls, if I write something, will you read it for me?

CLASS: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: All right. Close your eyes. Close your eyes. OK. OK, read me the story.

STUDENT: The pink fish likes pancakes.

JOHN MERROW: That's right. Did she get it right? Did she get it right? OK, what do you think of that story? Yes, what's wrong?

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STUDENT: Fish do not eat pancakes.

JOHN MERROW: Fish don't eat pancakes. That's good. You're good.

Then, I asked a few first-graders to read from "Nate the Great," a book they'd never seen before.

STUDENT: I had just eaten...

JOHN MERROW: "Br."

STUDENT: ... breakfast.

STUDENT: Now I, Nate the Great, will find a lost picture.

STUDENT: I went to Annie's house. Annie has brown hair and brown eyes.

JOHN MERROW: OK. Tell me about Annie.

STUDENT: Annie is a girl!

JOHN MERROW: Right. What color hair does she have?

STUDENT: Brown.

JOHN MERROW: What color eyes?

STUDENT: Brown.

JOHN MERROW: OK, cool. Let's go. Let's see.

These first-graders clearly understood what they were reading, a crucial indicator of reading proficiency.

The national goal is to have everybody reading by third grade. Does that surprise you, that first-graders can learn to read?

CHERYLLYN BRANCHE, Principal, Banneker Elementary School: Oh, no. Oh, no. We think and we know that children can learn to read at very early ages.

JOHN MERROW: Cheryllyn Branche is Banneker's veteran principal.

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CHERYLLYN BRANCHE: But the teachers have an understanding that reading is so important. The earlier the kids are exposed and the earlier they start, the more success they are not guaranteed to have, but more likely to have.

JOHN MERROW: Most of Branche's teachers are veterans. She gives them credit for the school's success.

CHERYLLYN BRANCHE: I prefer people who know what they're doing. I prefer people who have a proven track record. I prefer people who are going to stay here and work with our children for the long haul.

JOHN MERROW: It seems to be working. On the recent state tests, 55 percent of fourth-graders and 46 percent of eighth-graders passed. That makes Banneker one of the district's most improved schools.

CHERYLLYN BRANCHE: All of our teachers and students have done a great job, and it's been proven by the test scores. It's a wonderful place to be, and the people who work here enjoy working here.

### The long term view

JOHN MERROW: Our next stop, Fannie C. Williams, looks nothing like Banneker. It's just a group of trailers sitting way out in East New Orleans. Most schools in this area were damaged beyond repair by Katrina.

Fannie C. opened just this year, and their test scores were much lower: Only 29 percent of fourth-graders passed the state test. But inside Kerry White's (ph) first-grade classroom, the students were just as engaged as those at Banneker.

KERRY WHITE (ph), Teacher: So let's get started. We're going to read by groups.

JOHN MERROW: White has been teaching for three years.

KERRY WHITE: Somebody help me out, because I forgot this weekend what sound this little "a" makes.

CLASS: "A"!

KERRY WHITE: Very good. Excellent, excellent job.

JOHN MERROW: Again, I took over the class for a few minutes.

OK, who wants to read this one?

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CLASS: Jake is really great!

JOHN MERROW: OK. Let's just have one person read it. Yes?

STUDENT: Jake is really great.

JOHN MERROW: OK. Now, what does that mean?

STUDENT: Great means courageous.

JOHN MERROW: Courageous, that's a good word. Where'd you -- wow, courageous?

Would Ms. White's students be able to read and understand "Nate the Great"?

Let's go to the first page. OK, want to read it for me?

STUDENT: My name is Nate the Great.

STUDENT: I work alone. Let me tell you about my last case.

KELLY BATISTE, Principal, Fannie C. Williams Elementary School: I do have a group of good lower-elementary teachers who instill in the kids that importance for knowledge and being able to read.

JOHN MERROW: Kelly Batiste is the principal of Fannie C. Williams. Of her 30 classroom teachers, over one-third are either new or uncertified.

KELLY BATISTE: I have a good balance of new versus experienced or veteran teachers.

JOHN MERROW: Batiste and her teachers are trying to encourage these elementary school students to aspire beyond high school.

KELLY BATISTE: The road to college begins at Fannie C. Williams. And so you'll see the college banners across the campus.

KERRY WHITE: Instead of us calling them first-graders or second-graders, we're calling them the class of 2019, the class of 2020, because that's the expectation of they're going to go to a college or a trade school.

JOHN MERROW: At both schools we visited, we were impressed by the first-graders' reading proficiency. We wondered if Paul Vallas would be surprised.

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Mr. Vallas, what do you think would happen if I went into your first-grade classes and asked them to read that book?

PAUL VALLAS: Well, right now, I think most of the kids would struggle, but hopefully in the next year or two they'll struggle less.

JOHN MERROW: Should I tell you that I spent the last two days with your first-graders and they read that with comprehension?

PAUL VALLAS: Yes, but which school?

JOHN MERROW: Banneker Elementary School.

PAUL VALLAS: Yes, yes, I believe that. James Johnson (ph) and...

JOHN MERROW: Fannie Williams.

PAUL VALLAS: Yes, but the majority of our kids would struggle with that. I'm telling you, 85 percent of the kids are a year-and-a-half to two years below grade level. So the majority of the kids would struggle with that type of textbook.

### **Overcrowding a major problem**

JOHN MERROW: Vallas offered to identify schools where first-graders would have trouble reading, but we found one on our own.

Sarah T. Reed Elementary School looks just like Fannie C. Williams, a group of trailers out in East New Orleans that opened just this year. Reed's test scores are the same: 29 percent of their fourth-graders passed a state test.

But unlike Fannie C. Williams, Reed was overwhelmed by an unexpected influx of families returning to the city.

DAPHYNE BURNETT, Principal, Sarah T. Reed Elementary School: The district had anticipated that I would have 125 kids. I ended up with 400 students.

JOHN MERROW: As enrollment swelled, first-year principal Daphyne Burnett had to find teachers wherever she could. Three quarters of her teachers are rookies.

Is that your choice?

DAPHYNE BURNETT: No, it was not.

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NICOLE TATE, Teacher, Sarah T. Reed Elementary School: OK, we're going to start at the first word, at the top. Put your finger on the first word. That word is "almost."

CLASS: "Almost," a-l-m-o-s-t.

JOHN MERROW: Nicole Tate was hired late, well into the fall semester, to teach the growing number of first-graders.

NICOLE TATE: Next word, "does."

CLASS: "Does," d-o-e-s, "does."

JOHN MERROW: Tate is in her first year teaching after an 18-year career in the military.

NICOLE TATE: I didn't think I can teach the children to read. I never had anybody say, "OK, Ms. Tate, you're doing this wrong, but let me show you how to do it." Nobody never came, so I had figure it out on my own.

And I was like, "Maybe if I let them read and they hear themselves read, they'll be better readers," so that's what I started doing.

JOHN MERROW: She let me take over the class just as I had done at Banneker and Fannie C. Williams.

All right, who wants to read this one? How about this little boy in the red shirt?

STUDENT: The purple pancake ate the fish?

STUDENT: A pancake's not alive, and it can't eat.

JOHN MERROW: What? You don't like that story?

While a few students were quick to respond, most struggled.

Try it. It's a "w" sound.

STUDENT: "Whale."

JOHN MERROW: "Whale."

Just as I had done at the other schools, I chose some children at random and asked them to read from "Nate the Great."

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STUDENT: We sit down like...

JOHN MERROW: I've got to let you get this word. Do the first part.

STUDENT: Little?

JOHN MERROW: Little.

STUDENT: It.

JOHN MERROW: It.

STUDENT: Was.

JOHN MERROW: It was.

STUDENT: A...

JOHN MERROW: No, it's an "h" sound.

STUDENT: I'm tired.

JOHN MERROW: Yes, that's a hard word.

Across the hall, another first-grade class has had a substitute teacher since February when the previous teacher was fired.

DAPHYNE BURNETT: We had a lot of subs in two of our first-grade classes.

JOHN MERROW: With all the changes, the influx of kids, having to get rid of a teacher, a substitute, what have your first-graders lost this year?

DAPHYNE BURNETT: When you look at younger kids, out of anything they could have lost, it was the opportunity to have a stable learning environment. You know, some of them, this is their first time going to school because Katrina hit.

**Shortage of materials also an issue**

JOHN MERROW: Reading specialists are assigned to every elementary school, but Burnett says she does not have enough.

DAPHYNE BURNETT: We have asked for help. There's a shortage of paraeducators and teachers in those subject areas in which we need them in.

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JOHN MERROW: Burnett says Reed is also short on materials to help struggling readers.

PAUL VALLAS: We've been pretty good. The majority of the schools receive the supplies they needed. And, you know, you're not going to snap your fingers, and everybody is going to be thoroughly trained in all the interventions that they need to be thoroughly trained in. Sometimes it takes two to three years.

JOHN MERROW: Will that be too late for the kids at Reed? Research studies indicate that children who fall behind in reading in first grade have only a 1-in-8 chance of catching up.

PAUL VALLAS: The game plan is to get the kids up to grade level and to get the kids up to grade level at an accelerated pace. I mean, that's why schools are going to run until 4:30. That's why kids are going to spend three hours a day on reading and sometimes two hours a day on math. That's why kids are going to be in school 11 months.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas harbors no illusions about the challenges ahead.

PAUL VALLAS: I say that we're like at base camp preparing to climb Mount Everest. The only difference is last year we weren't even in the Himalayas.