

**LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE**  
**Paul Vallas in New Orleans**  
**Episode 6: Mixed Results for Efforts in New Orleans**  
**Airdate: July 24, 2008**

**TRANSCRIPT**

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Correspondent: It's graduation time in New Orleans, but the music and the smiles mask a grim reality. Only about half of ninth-graders in New Orleans ever make it this far.

That's why this man was brought in. New Orleans School Superintendent Paul Vallas, a veteran who headed the Chicago and Philadelphia school districts, has spent his first year here trying to educate a population of nearly 13,000 students. Many are far behind.

PAUL VALLAS, Superintendent, Recovery School District: Two-thirds of the kids are at least one year older than grade level. A large number of the kids are two years or older than grade level. And I'm talking about 16-, 17-year-old eighth-graders. I'm talking about 18-year-old ninth-graders who are two, three, four years below grade level academically.

JOHN MERROW: Vallas is talking about students like Brittne Jackson. When we met her last fall, she was a 19-year-old third-year senior who said she had failed the science section of the graduation exam 14 times.

BRITTNE JACKSON, Senior, Rabouin High School: I always had the Ds and the Fs, because I ain't never went to class and I never want to do nothing.

JOHN MERROW: Although she wanted her diploma, Brittne spent most of her time working two jobs, totaling nearly 70 hours a week. Between work and traveling to work, Brittne found it difficult to make time to study.

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

JOHN MERROW: Kady Amundson was Brittne's biology teacher.

KADY AMUNDSON: It's been tough with Brittne. Brittne's a kid that I really care a lot about and I really wanted to see succeed. She's also a kid that I've had to kind of bend over backwards for. She just hasn't come to school a lot.

### **Recruiting enthusiastic teachers**

JOHN MERROW: Kady is one of a number of teachers fresh out of college that Paul Vallas recruited through programs like Teach for America and Teach New Orleans. Kady spent a lot of time working one-on-one with Brittne.

KADY AMUNDSON: ... or I might just have to meet with you later, OK, and we'll get you caught up.

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BRITTNE JACKSON: Ms. Amundson is someone who is going to sit down and make sure you get it. She's going to explain this and explain it and explain it until you get it.

JOHN MERROW: As the big test approached, Vallas was betting on teachers like Kady to go the extra mile.

PAUL VALLAS: There's no substitute for that enthusiastic teacher who's willing, who's willing to work like there's no tomorrow. And I think we're recruiting more and more of these individuals.

JOHN MERROW: To reach students who are behind, Vallas plans to bring in at least 140 more young and energetic teachers, and he's extending the school day.

PAUL VALLAS: All the teachers will be remaining on campus to work with the kids 4:30 and beyond. Knowing Kady Amundson, she'll probably stay until 5:30 now.

Keeping older students in school

JOHN MERROW: Students like Brittne Jackson are the easiest of a tough bunch. It may have taken her a while, but now she can see the finish line: She's within one test of graduating.

But imagine being 16 or 17 years old and only in eighth grade and reading at or fourth- or fifth-grade level. These students are the biggest challenge, because nothing the system has tried so far has worked.

When we met 16-year-old Antoine Duplessis in the fall, he was old enough to be a high school junior, but Antoine was still in the eighth grade and barely making it.

ANTOINE DUPLESSIS, Eighth Grade, Booker T. Washington School: All I can say is I hope I can stay in school. I'm going to try my best to stay in school.

JOHN MERROW: Antoine, his mother, three sisters, and baby nephew shared a house in the Ninth Ward, a neighborhood hit hard by Hurricane Katrina.

HELEN MILLER, Parent: Antoine has had a lot of problems in school throughout the time he's been in school. I would have to go to the school constantly, constantly, constantly, because they say he was disruptive. They would put him out.

It's hard on me, because I never know what he's going to do next. I just pray that he do the right thing.

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ANTOINE DUPLESSIS: The only thing anybody can do is show you the path. It's my choice to take it.

PAUL VALLAS: There's a real struggle to get some of the older kids in school. I mean, some of these kids, you know, 17-year-old eighth-graders reading at the third- and fourth-grade reading level, I mean, how do you convince someone that old to go to school?

JOHN MERROW: To try to break the pattern of failure, Vallas set up a special school just for overage eighth graders, 180 in all, including Antoine Duplessis.

Vallas hired Camelot, a private company he'd worked with in Philadelphia, to run the school. But because of red tape, their contract wasn't signed until mid-year. That meant that Booker T. Washington opened with a staff supplied by the district.

Here, the students must pass a state test in order to move on to the ninth grade. However, reaching a student population so far behind presents unique challenges.

JEFFREY BERMAN, Teacher, Booker T. Washington School: Many of my students repeatedly say, "I'm sick of being in the eighth grade. I'm sick of not being able to pass this."

JOHN MERROW: Jeffrey Berman is an English teacher at Booker T. Washington.

JEFFREY BERMAN: The challenges they face, honestly, the biggest one is motivation. You experience failure long enough, you're not going to even want to even try anymore, because you're going to expect to fail every time.

JOHN MERROW: When the private company, Camelot, finally took over in December, it found that disruptive behavior was the norm.

TEACHER: Why are you in here? Where are you supposed to be?

TODD BOCK, Vice President of Education Services, Camelot: They need a culture that is safe, that really goes above and beyond what traditional schools are geared to deal with. I think that's what Camelot does very well.

JOHN MERROW: Camelot's Todd Bock came to New Orleans to manage Booker T.

TODD BOCK: We focused a lot of our attention in behavior management. Around here, we come to school. Around here, we go to class. Around here, we respect authority figures.

JOHN MERROW: By February, Booker T. seemed to have calmed down. In March, Camelot closed its doors to our cameras for the rest of the year.

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Outside school, one teacher told us his version of what was going on.

LUKE STRATTNER, teacher, Booker T. Washington School: There was big fights going on every day.

JOHN MERROW: Luke Strattner teaches math at Booker T. Washington.

LUKE STRATTNER: There was so much chaos that the Camelot guys, you know, we were all trying to control the chaos, but it wasn't really working.

### **Disappointing test scores**

JOHN MERROW: The results of the state test, known as LEAP, were announced in May. Out of 180 students at Booker T., only eight passed.

Do you feel Camelot was successful in their half-year here?

PAUL VALLAS: Yes. Let me point out that, two years ago, 90 percent of those kids would have dropped out. We have to understand the student population that we're dealing with. It's going to take you more than a year to get them academically to the point where they can pass the eighth-grade exit exam.

JOHN MERROW: Although very few students passed the exam, most seem to be moving up anyway.

LUKE STRATTNER: To my knowledge, all of the students are going to be socially promoted to ninth grade, even though this whole year we told them, "If you don't pass the LEAP, you're not going to the ninth grade."

JOHN MERROW: Not even 10 percent of the students passed the exam, and yet apparently they've been moved up to ninth grade. Why?

PAUL VALLAS: First of all, kids can't be moved to ninth grade unless they pass the test.

JOHN MERROW: But according to three teachers at Booker T. Washington, all students will move on to a regular high school if they take remediation courses over the summer. Vallas says he's doing what makes the most sense.

PAUL VALLAS: A number of the students, they may have not passed all of the subjects on the eighth-grade exit exam, but they've gotten good grades, good behavior, good attendance, for all practical purposes, can manage ninth-grade work.

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They may move to high schools, because each individual high school has its own ninth-grade transition program. But they're not officially ninth-graders, and they have to be retested again.

LUKE STRATTNER: We're doing the same thing that's the problem in the first place. They're too old to be in eight grade, so let's move them to ninth grade. We're basically just putting the problem on somebody else is basically that's what were doing and basically what the district is doing.

JOHN MERROW: In Vallas' view, many of the problems were created because Camelot got a late start, halfway into the year.

**A long way to go**

PAUL VALLAS: They inherited teachers who did not want to be there and some teachers who shouldn't have been anywhere. And, of course, by next year, that problem will be solved, because Camelot will not only be running the school, but they will have staffed the school.

JOHN MERROW: Luke Strattner has applied to teach at Booker T. Washington again next year. So has Jeffrey Berman. Neither has heard yet whether they will return.

Vallas has extended Camelot's contract for another year, and he's expanding Booker T. to include overage sixth- and seventh-grade students.

But even if Camelot is successful, Antoine Duplessis is not likely to benefit. He dropped out in January. And when we visited his home in June, it appeared to have been abandoned.

PAUL VALLAS: Next year, it will be harder for a young man like Antoine to disappear. We're converting our entire safety and security force into a force of school resource officers. They will play a counseling role. They'll be contacting the home. Large numbers will be visiting the home to find out where the kids are and to get them into school.

JOHN MERROW: As for Brittne Jackson, in February she took the test she needed to pass to graduate, the one she had failed so many times previously.

ANNOUNCER: Brittne Jackson.

JOHN MERROW: She made it. In June, Brittne, now 20, finally got to walk across the stage, diploma in hand.

BRITTNE JACKSON: You just feel relieved after you get a high school diploma, because I know that my dreams won't stop. My dreams can go forward.

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JOHN MERROW: Although the overall dropout rate remains high, more seniors managed to graduate at the end of Vallas' first year, but he isn't satisfied.

PAUL VALLAS: Even with that improvement, the scores and the graduation rates are so low that, you know, we have an incredibly long way to go.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas has said that he intends to stay in New Orleans for one more year, two at the most.