

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE

Paul Vallas in New Orleans

Episode 7: Learning the Ropes in New Orleans

Airdate: October 17, 2008

TRANSCRIPT

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Correspondent: Superintendent Paul Vallas is feeling good. He's beginning his second year leading the Recovery School District, the lowest-performing schools in New Orleans.

At a rally, he praised his teachers for a year of progress.

PAUL VALLAS, Superintendent, Recovery School District: You did it. You did it. The increase in academic performance across the board, every grade, virtually every subject. And, you know, high school test scores don't increase anywhere in the country, except in New Orleans. High school teachers, stand up. Take a round of applause.

JOHN MERROW: Although test scores did go up last year, Vallas has his work cut out for him: 80 percent of students are still below grade level.

PAUL VALLAS: This is the great experiment here. We are rebuilding a public school system from the ground up.

JOHN MERROW: In the crowd are veteran teachers and first-time educators from organizations like Teach for America, who are fast-tracked into teaching for a two-year commitment.

PAUL VALLAS: I need the legends. I need the superstars. There is no greater calling than education, no greater calling.

Motivated to succeed

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas has already made a lot of changes: laptop computers for high school students; regular testing; a standardized curriculum; an extended school day and school year.

But in truth, the backbone of his plan is new teachers: young, idealistic, but inexperienced graduates of the nation's top colleges. He's really betting the farm that a steady stream of these young people can rebuild the New Orleans public schools.

DANIEL HOFFMAN, Teacher, G.W. Carver High School: So right now we're driving to Carver High School in the Upper Ninth Ward. It's one of the lowest-income areas of New Orleans.

JOHN MERROW: Daniel Hoffman just graduated from Yale.

DANIEL HOFFMAN: You know, I come from the suburbs. Everyone has a backyard, picket line fences, and the sense of having the ability to do anything. Here, it's just sort of a totally different place.

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

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I think, if we want to create a better New Orleans, education is the way to do it.

JOHN MERROW: Also new to town is Princeton graduate Jeylan Erman. She's made a home with three other first-time teachers.

JEYLAN ERMAN, Teacher, G.W. Carver High School: The whole aura of the city is all about change, all about reform. I never really believed that there could be such an energy and excitement for change until I came here.

JOHN MERROW: Zitsi Mirakhur is a graduate of the University of Chicago.

ZITSI MIRAKHUR, Teacher, G.W. Carver High School: For me, it was just a phenomenal opportunity to start fresh and to do something right and to show everyone else that you could fix an educational system.

JOHN MERROW: After six weeks of training elsewhere, the Teach for America Corps members arrived in New Orleans for more instruction.

TEACHER: This very high-stakes test, if they don't pass it, they're not going to move on. A lot is riding on this.

JOHN MERROW: One clear message: It won't be easy.

TEACHER: They know you're going to fail. And you have to have that idealism to bounce back from the failure and learn from it.

DANIEL HOFFMAN: I think it's vital for me to succeed. In my ordinary life, if I fail, I'm the only one failing. If I fail in this classroom, all my kids fail. That's what motivates me to succeed.

JOHN MERROW: It's that drive that Superintendent Paul Vallas is counting on.

PAUL VALLAS: These young people come with so much energy and so much dynamism. And they're so optimistic. They have such high expectations and high hopes. And I want to seize on that.

Challenges to grasping attention

JOHN MERROW: After just eight weeks of training, it's time to teach.

DANIEL HOFFMAN: Everyone, have a seat. Start working on your worksheet.

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Everyone familiar with the leader? Raise your hand. Give me a thumbs up if you're familiar with the leader; thumbs down if you're not. I just want to have a sense of where we are. I need everyone to give me either a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

I had a lot of trouble keeping kids on task, keeping them focused.

I need you to be working on this stuff. You're not going to get it unless you keep on trying.

I've got to be that much more on my game. I've got to get kids up, moving around. I can't try and do one thing for more than a certain amount of time or else the kids will not be able to focus.

JEYLAN ERMAN: So good afternoon, class.

CLASS: Good afternoon.

JEYLAN ERMAN: Good afternoon. Can you say, "Good afternoon"? You respond, "Good afternoon," all right, with power, with energy. So good afternoon.

CLASS: Good afternoon.

JEYLAN ERMAN: OK. And hopefully eventually I can teach you how to say that in another language, so we can spice it up a little from day to day, all right?

First, we're going to explore the benefits of a college education. I have a little activity I want you to do.

Thirty minutes into the class, students are looking left or right, and it's obvious that things are getting pretty tiring.

So what happens to average earnings as one level of education increases? What happens? It increases, right?

I'm going to have to work harder on doing more engaging activities. If I'm going to talk for a bit, I have to balance it with activities where students are also talking amongst themselves.

What I want to do now is take about 10 minutes to go over all of the expectations we have. We can't be late to class, so be here before the tardy bell rings, because when the bell rings, the door is shut, and we're going to get started.

And that's another one of our classroom expectations here, gentlemen, in the back, right? Please, please, please be respectful of each other, of me, and I think part of that is paying attention and looking up here while I'm speaking.

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One of the reasons why I'm having trouble getting control of my classroom is because this is the first time I've been in front of a large group of students.

JOHN MERROW: Later on, I met with seven of the new teachers.

Would you characterize your first two days as successful?

JEYLAN ERMAN: I mean, they weren't easy. They were very difficult. Physically draining, emotionally draining, but I loved it.

DANIEL HOFFMAN: I have not had as much success as I'd like to have in the first two days. When I talk to them, when I'm in the classroom, I'm thinking, "Oh, my God, what am I doing?"

BAYOJI AKINGBOLA, Teacher, Frederick A. Douglass High School: I told my kids today, going over the rules, I don't like being a disciplinarian, but if I have to, I will. And I'm weighting internally in my mind, "When can I start being nice? Because I barely smile."

ZITSI MIRAKHUR: I'm there to help them, but I can't engage them if they don't want to be engaged.

KRISTY DOOT, Teacher, G.W. Carver High School: I'm beginning to learn a lot of these so-called problem behaviors will go away as long as they're engaged and interested.

Skepticism of young teachers

JOHN MERROW: The struggling rookies can take heart from this man, Harvard graduate Colleston Morgan.

COLLESTON MORGAN, Teacher, G.W. Carver High School: Everybody knows who this guy is.

STUDENT: George Bush.

COLLESTON MORGAN: George Bush. Who is he?

STUDENT: Our president.

COLLESTON MORGAN: Hold on. You said he's not our president; Barack's our president. Is Barack our president?

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JOHN MERROW: Beginning his second year in Teach for America, Morgan says experience, momentum, and a connection with students seemed to be paying off.

COLLESTON MORGAN: I passed that sort of testing phase where you have to sort of build relationships with the students. I think they know what I'm in here for and that I'm here for them.

JOHN MERROW: But even with his success, Morgan is skeptical of Vallas' reliance on inexperienced teachers.

COLLESTON MORGAN: I don't think the answer is constantly bringing in 22-year-olds who are sort of starting at the very beginning of the learning curve. And, unfortunately, too many of us, by the time we actually get it right, are on our way back out the door to something else.

Vallas' belief in the educators

JOHN MERROW: Morgan's criticism is shared by others in the education field.

The rap against Teach for America is that you guys can spend two years, and put on your resume, and go to some fancy law school.

LINDSAY ORDOWER, Teacher, Frederick A. Douglass High School: I've heard it called "Teach for a While" instead of Teach for America. Even if it is two years, we're still, at our age, I think we're doing the most we can to affect the most lives.

KRISTY DOOT: This is what I'm here for. I don't need to go home to a family. For these two years, these kids are all that I'm focused on.

JOHN MERROW: Their boss believes that this dedication is bound to pay off.

PAUL VALLAS: I expect double-digit growth this year. And I'll go out on a limb now and say that I expect big gains, both in overall test scores and in graduation rates. I expect it. Hopefully, it will be double-digits, starting with a two or a three.

JOHN MERROW: Paul Vallas has a lot riding on the results. With this likely to be his last year in New Orleans, they will be an important measure of his success.