

LEADERSHIP: A CHALLENGING COURSE
Paul Vallas in New Orleans
Episode 8: Truancy in New Orleans Schools
Airdate: Februar 3, 2009

TRANSCRIPT

TRUANCY OFFICER: Now, where has this boy gone?

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour correspondent: These officers are part of a new task force in New Orleans. Their job is to search the streets for teenagers who ought to be in school.

TRUANCY OFFICER: Why you all late?

STUDENT: Just missed the streetcar.

TRUANCY OFFICER: You just missed the streetcar? Which means what? You need to get up a little earlier, right, and get out your house a little earlier, right?

STUDENT: Right.

TRUANCY OFFICER: Come on. It's truancy. Truancy is now in effect.

JOHN MERROW: On an average day in New Orleans' Recovery School District, about 20 percent of the students miss high school. That's nearly 800 teenagers.

LINDSAY ORDOWER, Teacher, Frederick A. Douglass High School: Kevin, where's Kevin?

JOHN MERROW: Lindsey Ordower teaches at Douglass High School.

LINDSAY ORDOWER: Nadia.

This is physical science, and I have 26 students on my roster, but on any given day I can expect about 17.

JOHN MERROW: You have 10 right now.

LINDSAY ORDOWER: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: One of them -- one just came in.

LINDSAY ORDOWER: Tardiness is also a problem.

Thank you. Any more power-ups from last week?

Yesterday, I saw a girl who has been on my roster since Aug. 14. We're in the second week of November, and I did not recognize her yesterday.

Teachers frustrated with truancy

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JOHN MERROW: Nina Barre's algebra class has 22 students enrolled. On this day, only 10 show up.

Is this frustrating for you as a teacher?

NINA BARRE, teacher, Frederick A. Douglass High School: Yes, it is, because we've got a lesson. Children don't come back. We have to repeat the lesson again because they've missed it.

JOHN MERROW: Do the kids who come to school regularly suffer?

NINA BARRE: Yes, they do.

JOHN MERROW: How?

NINA BARRE: Because they're getting the same lesson over and over again. They can't move on.

JOHN MERROW: So it's a lose-lose?

NINA BARRE: In some cases, yes.

JOHN MERROW: Even before Hurricane Katrina hit, the majority of students in New Orleans' public schools were woefully behind and buildings were falling apart.

In the flooding after the hurricane, 101 schools were damaged, some beyond repair. But when Superintendent Paul Vallas arrived last year, he believed that, despite the problems, if he built a great system, success would follow.

PAUL VALLAS, superintendent, New Orleans Recovery School District: I want to give all the kids hope, particularly the kids who are struggling. I want to tell those kids that I don't care if they're struggling or if they're D-minus student or even if they're a failing student. We'll help them get back on track.

JOHN MERROW: He's made some significant changes: a longer school day and year, hundreds of new teachers, and modernized classrooms.

PAUL VALLAS: Look, we introduced a heck of a lot of technology into the classrooms, SMART Boards, promethium boards, laptop computers, benchmarking, managed instruction, to make sure that we're giving them the resources they need so that they have a chance for success, but the rest is up to them.

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JOHN MERROW: But Vallas' optimistic philosophy -- build it and they will come -- has not solved the truancy problem.

WILFRED JOHNSON, principal, Frederick A. Douglass High School: We can only control certain aspects of attendance.

JOHN MERROW: Wilfred Johnson is the principal of Douglass High School.

WILFRED JOHNSON: These are older kids, 16, 17 years old. And for the most part, once we get them here, we do what we can to keep them here. But they're at that stage where they make decisions now and it's not always the right decision.

JOHN MERROW: That's why Vallas has turned to law enforcement.

TRUANCY OFFICER: You need to get up and get up on time, a little earlier, so you can get in school on time.

JOHN MERROW: His officers have the authority to issue court summons to truants 17 and older.

TRUANCY OFFICER: Just make sure you all go to school.

TRUANCY OFFICER: If you are not there, they will put a warrant out for your arrest, and I'm going to have to come and get you.

DORIS TAYLOR, police and public safety officer: We've been on the job doing truancy about five weeks now. Normally, we probably pick up like maybe seven truants a day, maybe anywhere between 25 or 30 truants a week.

Get to school on time.

Most of the kids we pick up, if they tell us we're not going to see them anymore, we don't see them anymore. So I think apprehending them plays an important role so they can understand these people are not playing with us. We need to get out of here and get into school.

Parents often part of problem

JOHN MERROW: Truants under the age of 17 are rounded up and brought here where they're put on file and given counseling. It's also an opportunity to discover why kids are skipping school.

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YOLONDE JOHNSON, truancy center administrator: Being trained social workers, we sort of pick up some things, you know, of what's going on with that student.

JOHN MERROW: Yolonde Johnson runs the truancy center.

YOLONDE JOHNSON: You've been doing something. Your eyes telling it all.

JOHN MERROW: She suspected that this teenager was using drugs.

YOLONDE JOHNSON: But I know you're doing something. You can mess your life up. You been doing something, right? Yes, or no?

STUDENT: Yes.

YOLONDE JOHNSON: OK, you need to go take care of it.

After speaking to him, he told me that he did have a problem, that he really needed help for the problem with substance abuse. He wanted the help. He wants to finish school.

JOHN MERROW: To help minors who may not have the support they need at home, Vallas is getting tough with their parents.

JOYNAL ABDIN, police and public safety officer: Police. Police. I'm here to serve your summons. You got your I.D.? Are you going to go to court?

PARENT: Yeah, I have to take that day off.

DORIS TAYLOR: Ma'am, make sure you go. Make sure you go, because if you don't, we're going to come back out and pick you up and bring you down to lock-up. That's your responsibility as a parent to make sure that your kids attend school.

And this makes me very frustrated, because this is a child's education we're talking about. There's no excuse why a child should miss 21 days and he's just a second-grader?

PARENT: Can I ask a question?

DORIS TAYLOR: Sure.

PARENT: Is there like any way that the state could pick them up, I mean, if they miss like a couple more days?

DORIS TAYLOR: You keep saying the state going to take them. You sound like you don't want with them.

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PARENT: To be honest with you, I don't.

JOYNAL ABDIN: If the parents don't want you, what kind of message do you think you're sending to the child? I mean, it's frustrating. It's sad. It's very emotional. But at the same time, that's what we're here for.

PAUL N. SENS, chief judge, New Orleans Municipal Court: I think the system is paying more attention and doing a better job getting those who are troubled into our system so that we can help.

Restoring faith in public school

JOHN MERROW: Judge Paul Sens says truancy prosecution is on the rise. Students and parents under court supervision are monitored for attendance. If truancy continues, the judge imposes fines or worse.

PAUL N. SENS: I will have the parent come in here, again tell them that ultimately, if they don't make sure their child is going to school, they can wind up over here and doing jail time as a result of it. So we have that same leverage with either a child or a parent.

JOHN MERROW: But law enforcement alone is not enough, a fact Paul Vallas acknowledges.

PAUL VALLAS: Tackling the problem is not only tracking the kids down, knocking on the doors, going to the homes, picking the kids up off the street, taking them to the truancy center. At the end of the day, you've got to give children an incentive to come to school.

JOHN MERROW: That could be Paul Vallas' greatest challenge: convincing people in New Orleans that public schools can work. For generations anyone who could afford it put their children in private or parochial school. Those left in the system haven't seen much evidence that education makes a difference. And if it didn't work for their parents or their grandparents, why should kids care?

The principal said that Friday is the day when an awful lot of kids skip school. Why do so many kids skip on Friday?

STUDENT: It's kind of like that day doesn't matter, because most teachers don't really give a lot of work on that day and just because it's kind of like a day to relax. And then you go through the entire weekend.

STUDENT: Because it's a half a day, and some people be wanting to, you know, get their weekend early.

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STUDENT: They want it earlier.

STUDENT: They want early weekend.

JOHN MERROW: It sounds like you're saying Friday is part of the weekend.

STUDENT: Most likely.

JOHN MERROW: But a lot of kids skip on Monday. Why Monday?

STUDENT: They don't come on Monday because Monday, they didn't get no rest, so they want to rest Monday.

Offering a work-study program

JOHN MERROW: Undeterred, Valas has another plan which he hopes will give students a powerful incentive to come to school.

PAUL VALLAS: Students after their ninth grade will be able to go to high school and work at the same time. I think that might change the culture. It may change the dynamic. It might change their attitudes. It might give them a reason, an incentive to come to school and to stay in school.

JOHN MERROW: And to come on Monday and Friday.

PAUL VALLAS: Yes, and through Friday.

JOHN MERROW: For truants who aren't drawn to work-study and aren't fazed by the law, Vallas plans to transfer them to smaller, specialized schools. He's got his work cut out for him. About half of his high school students are now chronically truant by state standards.

Is it possible that this situation is worse than you think?

PAUL VALLAS: You're asking me, do we have a problem with truancy? Yes. So it is a serious problem, and we're trying to take action. But I'm not going to change to accommodate the culture; I want the culture to change to accommodate me.

JOHN MERROW: That could take some time. Vallas recently extended his contract, giving himself a third year to accomplish his goals.

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