

Kids Rethinking New Orleans Schools
News Conference
Our New Orleans Schools: What We Endured, What
We Envision
July 21, 2006

On the site of the storm-ravaged Sherwood Forest Elementary School in New Orleans East.

Isaiah Simms
Opening Statement

Hello, my name is Isaiah Simms and I am a public school student.

I am 11-years-old, going into 7th grade. My elementary school was messed up by Katrina and is now closed. My house was also messed up and my family and I are living in a trailer while we rebuild our house and my grandma's house.

Welcome to our Rethink news conference. We are Rethink – Kids Rethinking New Orleans Schools. We've been meeting all summer long to think about the public schools.

We thought a lot about our past schools and our dreams for our future schools. Some of us went to better New Orleans Schools and some of us went to failing ones. Some of us loved our schools even though they failed us.

Most New Orleans kids had a bad education before Katrina. Before the hurricane, 112 of our 128 schools were judged to be failing. We put up with a lot, and you will hear about that today.

We have a vision: a great education for every kid in New Orleans, no matter what neighborhood they stay in, no matter how much money their parents make, and no matter what the color of their skin.

All of our parents pay taxes. All of us deserve the same good education.

Before Katrina, most of our schools were raggedy with lots of problems. 85% of our schools were destroyed.

No one deserves a voice in rebuilding our schools more than us, the students who go to these schools every day.

Our group, Rethink, we want to help you adults rethink and rebuild the schools. Give us that chance. Listen to us and let us have a voice.

Next year, we want to evaluate some of the schools that are open, and write a book about kids in New Orleans Schools before and after Katrina. We met for six weeks this summer to make these plans, and we are ready to go. Please listen to us this morning and let us help Rethink our New Orleans schools.

Amber, Melissa and Jeremy Augustine ***Dedication to our cousins lost in the storm***

Hello, my name is Amber Augustine.

My name is Melissa Augustine.

My name is Jeremy Augustine.

MELISSA:

We went to this school – Sherwood Forest - and we live in this community. We want to welcome you here, and we want to show you what happened to our old school. It is sad and horrible.

MELISSA AND AMBER OPEN THE DOORS TO THE MOLD-INFESTED, FLOOD-RUINED FRONT HALLWAY. IT SMELLS HORRIBLE.

JEREMY:

We want to dedicate this news conference to our cousins Matava and Davante Trueblood. Katrina took their lives. Matava and Davante will not be in school next year, but we have saved some seats in their honor.

JEREMY AND THE GIRLS POINT TO THE TWO DESKS WHERE CANDLES ARE LIGHTED.

JEREMY:

We found two plaques at another deserted school in New Orleans East. The school was made into a shelter after the hurricane. These plaques seemed just right for our cousins.

JEREMY GIVES PLAQUES TO HIS SISTERS. AMBER AND MELISSA READ THE PLAQUES. “IN MEMORY OF ALL THE SUFFERING CHILDREN FROM KATRINA,” AND “IN MEMORIAM. MAY THEY STAND BY GOD IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. MAY THEIR SPIRITS AND FAITH LIVE ON.”

JEREMY:

Girls could you put the plaques on the desks?

THEY PUT PLAQUES AND ALSO FLOWERS ON THE DESKS.

JEREMY:

Our cousins were fun outgoing children and it is a shame that they will not be in school next year. We dedicate this news conference to my cousins and to all the children dead and still missing because of Katrina. Thank you.

RETHINKER EACH READ A FEW SENTENCES FROM THEIR TESTIMONIES.

Shannon Taylor

What we endured

My name is Shannon Taylor, I am 16-years-old and I am a public school student.

I am speaking now on behalf of all of us at Rethink. This is a list we made up that includes some of the things we endured in the public schools.

Several kids have been in classes where students do not have enough chairs and desks. One Rethinker says she sat on the edge of a table all year long in two of her classes.

Many Rethinkers have been in classes where students share books, sometimes three to a book. This is very hard because kids are working on different chapters and no one gets to take the books home. One of our Rethink mentors just graduated from high school this June. She says in 12 years she never owned a knapsack. She did not need to – her schools never gave her any books.

Many kids say their books were old, torn and out of date.

Most all Rethinkers, even in the better public schools, report filthy bathrooms. They say that their school bathrooms have no toilet paper and no soap. They also report that in some bathrooms, they have seen in schools across this city, the doors and sinks are hanging off the walls. We do not want in any way to blame our janitors. There are not enough of them to keep the schools clean.

Many of our group say they feel unsafe in their schools.

Our lunches are not healthy enough. For breakfast, we sometimes get a greasy donut. For lunch, we sometimes get a greasy burger. We deserve healthier meals.

If you are a vegetarian because of your religion – let's say you are a Muslim - you have to bring your own lunch.

We all have to take LEAP tests and many of us never studied the material they tested us on. No wonder that so many of us failed.

Some of us Rethinkers went to schools in other states after Katrina, and found that we were one year, often two years, behind the school kids there. Some of us barely learned to read in New Orleans.

Briante told us that she evacuated to Texas after Katrina. She attended a school that made her realize she was cheated out of an education back home. The school was nice and it had updated books, one for every student. It had lockers, elevators, and teachers who really wanted to teach. Those schools had after school programs, and other electives that kids were interested in like French & Spanish.

Why can't we have all this in our schools? Is it really asking that much? We are just kids and all we want is a good education.

So these are some of the things we endured in the past. Now Josie Bingler will tell you some of our dreams for the future.

Josephine Bingler *What we envision*

My name is Josephine Bingler and I am a public school student.

You heard from the Rethinkers about some of the changes we dream of:

Clean bathrooms
New books we do not have to share
Safe schools
Teachers who love to teach
Plenty of extracurricular activities

In addition we came up with other changes we think we deserve:

Schools with no graffiti on the walls
Schools with nice sports equipment. No more rusty, broken down goals and deflated balls.

Clean bathroom and goals that aren't broken may not sound like dreams to you, but they are to us because we don't have them. These are our first dreams for better schools.

We did have time to dream bigger dreams at Rethink this summer, and we actually built these dreams into a sculpture. (She points to the 12-foot-high house of cards sculpture.) When you look at our sculpture, notice Trynisha's ideas for a kids' lounge and Victor's plan for a cool library. Get Briante and Shannon to show you their food court with healthy food. Ask Dudley to tell you his ideas for a media center and check out my garden for kids.

One day this summer, Bobbie Hill from Concordia Architects came to visit us and she showed us a video of some public schools around the world that were in a contest for the best school design. Looking at these schools just blew our minds. Here were these pictures of public schools in places like Mexico, Japan, and California. They were beautiful beyond our wildest dreams. Some of them had whole front sides made of glass and big trees and fishponds and libraries. These schools made us realize that public schools can be great, not just good. They can be inspiring and fabulous places to study. Seeing these pictures made a big impression on us. We were very surprised - and some of us felt angry comparing these public schools to our own.

Next year at Rethink 2 summer school, we are going to challenge ourselves to dream big big dreams, huge dreams about schools like the ones Bobbie showed us. And I bet we can get some of them built. Maybe these dream schools won't be ready in my time, but I bet we could have one ready about the time my cousin Lyle goes to school. (Shows Lyle's picture.)

So for now, that's my biggest dream of all. That Lyle will have a truly wonderful and beautiful school by the time he is my age.

Thank you.

Anthony Ayala and Hoang Hoang ***Future Plans / School Evaluations***

Hello, I am Anthony Ayala and I am Hoang Hoang. We are public school students.

ANTHONY:

We Rethinkers want to have a voice in rebuilding our schools. So part of our job will be to keep an eye on the public schools this year. We want to watch how they are doing. Grown ups need to keep an eye on the schools, but so do us kids. Kids are the ones who go to the schools every day, and believe me, we know a lot about them.

This summer, a professional evaluator came to class and helped us make this evaluation. Hoang, can you read the questions on our form?

HOANG READS THE FORM, BLOWN UP TO GIANT SIZE AND SITTING ON AN EASEL.

ANTHONY:

So here is the deal.....the schools give us kids report cards. We want to do the same thing – give our schools a report card. We cannot evaluate all the schools this year, but we could do quite a few over the coming years – all of our public schools including the charters.

We would like to ask Dr. Robin Jarvis and also Ms. Phyllis Landrieu if they would meet with us to help us plan how to use this evaluation.

HOANG:

Dr. Jarvis is in our audience today (points to her). She will speak in a little while. And I bet she will agree to meet with us Rethinkers sometime soon!!

Thank you.

A few words from our Writing Mentor, Ashley Nelson

Brief words of Encouragement from Dr. Robin Jarvis, Acting Superintendent, Recover School District

Closing Comments, Isaiah Simms
