

Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools

Bathroom Blues News Conference

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Dudley C. Grady, Jr. and Monica Tyran

Welcome

Hello. My name is Dudley C. Grady, Jr. I am a Rethink intern and a public school student. On behalf of Rethink, or Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools, I'd like to welcome you to our second annual news conference.

Hello, my name is Monica Tyran, and I am a college student working with YA/YA, Young Aspirations, Young Artists.

YA/YA is a guild for young artists in New Orleans, and you probably have heard of us. Our work is all around the United States and beyond. We have painted murals in Europe and Asia. We designed the cloth for the seats in the UN General Assembly. Here in the city, we have a number of projects, including our after school program at Science and Math and other schools. This summer and last summer we worked with Rethink. If you look around you, you will see the YA/YA contribution to this news conference.

- Over there, the life-sized model of the public school bathroom some of us endure. We designed and built the stall.
- Over there, the huge bathroom posters with messages. We helped the Rethinkers draw the pictures and create the messages.
- Our interns have worked all summer long with Rethink and we are proud to call Rethink a sister organization. We even share an office with Rethink in this building!

(Dudley) Our news conference today has three purposes.

- To release our Rethink report evaluating public schools from the point of view of students.
- To unveil Rethink's design and maintenance plan for what we call a 21st century public school bathroom. This bathroom we designed is the first "green" public school bathroom in the United States. It is a bathroom that is the complete

opposite of our current school bathrooms, which Rethinkers see as an emblem of disrespect for school children. For us, our current bathrooms *symbolize* the worst of our problems in the post-Katrina schools. Our new 21st century bathroom design, as you will see, gives us a way to not only solve a problem but to distinguish ourselves nationally. We want to show the whole country that New Orleans is not just catching up post Katrina, but ready to lead the way in quality education.

- Our third reason for being here is to offer some urgent recommendations to all our public school systems – Recovery School District, New Orleans Public Schools and the charters. *We ask that you listen carefully to us because we are experts on the public schools. We students are the client. We use these schools every day.*

Before I introduce our other speakers, let me tell you a little about Rethink.

- We are public school kids from all over New Orleans. We go to all different schools.
- Our vision is a great education for every kid in New Orleans, no matter their neighborhood, how much money their parents make or the color of their skin.
- Rethink began in 2006 as a summer school program where students were encouraged to dream big about better schools. At the end of the summer, we held a news conference outside a school that was wrecked by the storm.
- We have been busy ever since documenting, dreaming and taking action about our public schools.
- This school year, we began a monthly column in *The Trumpet*, a great community newspaper published by the Neighborhood Planning Network. We evaluated public schools. We took pictures. We spoke at public gatherings in Louisiana and other states.
- Our most recent gig was at the US Social Forum in Atlanta, where we gave a workshop.
- We have just today completed our second Rethink summer program.
- This summer and last, the Rethinkers kept coming back to the bathroom. Maybe if we could *rethink* the bathroom, then we could work our way out to the rest of the school, solving our problems one step at a time.
- You will see from our school evaluations that it is not only the Rethinkers who are concerned about bathrooms. In our survey of all types of New Orleans schools, students gave cleanliness and bathrooms a very low rating.

- So stay tuned: you are about to hear all kinds of interesting things at this news conference.

Courtney French

Let me tell you about my school

Hello. My name is Courtney French, I am going into 8th grade and I am a Rethinker. I attend an RSD (Recovery School District) school with about 400 students and I want to tell you a little about my school. I also want to tell you what Rethinkers who go to other types of public schools say about their schools, too.

My school is an elementary school that goes to 8th grade. When I get there in the morning, I go through a metal detector. We have about 12 security guards, two of which are police officers. If something beeps, they search my book bag and pocketbook. Before Katrina, my school had no security guards.

At the beginning of the day, the toilets are dirty. We have no toilet paper or soap. Sometimes our teachers give us toilet paper, but not often. One of our bathrooms has a big hole in the wall. In another of the bathrooms, four of the six stalls have no doors. There is writing all over the walls, pee on the floor and a terrible smell.

About half of the kitchens in the Recovery District School have never opened up after the storm. My school has no kitchen. So we eat the same cold sandwich three days a week and pizza two days a week. It's hard to say what the meat is in the sandwich, but I can tell you it sometimes has black spots on it and the edges are purple.

Sometimes our security guards are a problem. Some guards act like the students. A lot of money is invested in security that does make students feel any safer in their schools. A lot of our Rethinkers do not have security guard problems at their schools, but half of the Rethinkers – we come from all types of New Orleans public schools - have no toilet paper in our bathrooms. Some of the Rethinkers who have toilet paper in their bathrooms say that their parents have to buy it.

Here are some of our recommendations.

For all types of public schools in New Orleans:

- Repair our bathrooms and keep them clean. That means hiring enough janitors and buying enough supplies so we can all have enough toilet paper. Parents should not have to buy toilet paper. *Toilet paper, like water, should be free for all public school students.*

For the Recovery School District:

- We hear you are repairing our bathrooms and kitchens right now. Thank you so much. We also know the RSD is spending millions of dollars to hire security guards. *How about if direct some of that money instead to hire counselors and janitors?*

You will see that we Rethinkers are not just about pointing out problems. We also have solutions to suggest.

Please listen to us. We students are experts on our schools. My school has many problems, but I love my school. I am willing to work to solve my school's problems and so are all the Rethinkers. Thank you.

Isaiah Simms and Lucy Tucker ***Our evaluation of New Orleans schools***

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

Hi, my name is Lucy Tucker, and I am a public school Rethinker!

(Isaiah) In the summer of 2006, we Rethinkers decided to do a survey of the New Orleans public schools from the point of view of students. We made up a survey that summer, and with the help of some adult friends who know a lot about doing surveys, we went to work.

(Lucy) First we chose the schools. We did what they call a “random sample” from each of the public school systems we have in New Orleans right now. The way we did it was by using this hat. (Lucy takes her hat off her head and shows it to the audience.)

We have five different types of public schools now – state-run, city-run and three types of charters. We put all the state-run school names into my hat and pulled out two names. We then put the city-run public school names in my hat and chose two. You let the picture.

(Isaiah) We are not going to go into much detail about how we did this survey, because it is all in our report. Take a look in your press kits right now and make sure you have it.

(Lucy) Well, it was quite a project!!! We went to nine different schools, collected almost 600 student surveys, and took our own notes about what we saw. Later we looked at the results and made our own recommendations. We are very proud of this survey and we thank all the public school students who filled out our questionnaire.

We have many adults to thank, but I would like to give a special thanks to Carolyn Croom, a UNO graduate students who stuck with us on this project to the bitter end. Ms. Carolyn, can you stand up?

(Isaiah) After the news conference, please stay for our technical panel to learn all about this report. But for now, we will tell you a few of the interesting things we learned from our surveys:

- In all the school surveys, students gave cleanliness and bathrooms the *second lowest* ratings. We Rethinkers noted in our personal observations that every school had at least one bathroom that was dirty and in need of repair.
- Students reported that their schools had good supplies and books for all students, with a school average rating of 73%. Each school had a working library or access to a working library that was clean and equipped.

(Lucy) Students said they had access to nurses and counselors an average school rating of 88%. This was the *highest* rated school category.

- Students gave the lowest rating to the taste of food in their schools. Information from two of the lowest scoring schools reported that there was no cafeteria in operation at the time of the visit. We learned that the students at these schools had sandwiches delivered four times a week and a local pizza delivery on Fridays.

Isaiah: Most students felt their schools were safe and secure. We observed a lot of security guards at two of the schools. Students at these two places gave their schools the lowest rating for feeling safe and secure.

One of the eight things we asked kids to rate was, “At this school, teachers are dedicated and like teaching kids.” The average rating for the schools was 62% but five of the nine schools had above average ratings.

(Lucy) One of the reasons we decided to work on bathrooms this summer was that so many kids in New Orleans gave them low ratings in our survey. We saw with our own eyes, as we said, that in every school at least one bathroom was dirty and in need of repair.

We Rethinkers want to document our school problems and then offer solutions. This is what Rethink is all about. Now I want to introduce you to Victor and Josie, who will tell you about our green 21st Century bathroom.

Thank you!

Victor Carter and Josie Bingler ***The Rethinker's 21st century bathroom design***

Good morning. I'm Victor
and I'm Josie.

(Victor) We are Rethinkers. We're here to talk to you today about our bathroom design. While we applaud the Recovery schools for taking action this summer to repair all their school bathrooms, we've taking things to the next level and this summer we designed a bathroom of the 21st century.

(Josie) This is what Rethink is all about – RETHINKING! For many students in New Orleans, and in cities all around this country, the bathroom represents everything that stinks in our schools.

So we decided to turn that symbol inside out and design something that New Orleans could be really proud of. A bathroom design that shows that after Katrina, we are not just playing a catch up game. We are putting ourselves out front as a city that really cares about QUALITY education and is an example to the rest of the country.

We chose to make our 21st century bathroom “green” because we understand the importance of protecting the earth and putting an end to global warming. We want our schools to be earth-friendly and environmentally sustainable. We believe that students deserve to have beautiful and clean bathrooms that are good to the environment at the same time.

(Victor) Our design includes:

- Flow reducers for the sinks to reduce the flow of water coming out of the faucet
- High and low E windows—windows that keep heat out, but let the light in.
- Recycled tiles and countertops made from 100% recycled glass and porcelain.
- Waterless urinals that use no water saving the school money on the water bill
- Non-toxic paints made from raw ingredients that have little or no allergic reactions.
- Bamboo stalls that are both beautiful and help to reduce the cutting of trees.
- Non-florescent lights—these lights are more energy efficient compared to incandescent, are cooler and have a longer life span.
- We recommend putting a cistern, a large container to collect water, on the roof of our schools. Rain water from the cistern can be used to flush our sinks and toilets. That saves on our city water.

Over the coming years, we will be repairing our schools that were damaged because of Katrina, and building new ones from scratch. Our recommendation is that all the public schools go green. You can add parts of our design to bathrooms you repair, or build a

complete Rethink 21st century bathroom in the schools you build from scratch.

(Josie) We hope you will see from our design that we students are experts on our schools and we have great ideas to make things better.

Hoang Hoang and Aaron Dianielson

Keeping bathrooms clean

Good morning. I'm Hoang.
And I'm Aaron and we're Rethinkers.

(Aaron) As you have heard, we want clean and green bathrooms in our schools. What we want to talk with you about now is a plan for maintaining clean and green bathrooms. The truth of the matter is this: No matter how much you repair a bathroom and no matter how green you make it, the bathroom needs to be maintained. If not, it will return to c-r-a-p.

We believe that we need an adequate number of janitors for each of our schools, and enough supplies to go around every day. We also believe that this is not enough. Maintaining a bathroom is something the whole school has to do. That means students have to play a role, too.

(Hoang) So we propose the following:

- Place unique trash cans (they may look like basketball goals or targets) inside the bathrooms. They will attract the attention of the students.
- Lock or monitor dispensers for paper products.
- Place a drain underneath the urinals and toilets.
- Schedule teacher inspections and custodial checks throughout the day.

(Aaron)

- Appoint a committee of students to act as monitors for the restrooms.
- Create a poster campaign to promote cleanliness and pride in the earth-friendly student design.
- Install smoke detectors in the bathrooms.
- As we said earlier, reallocate money from the security budget to hire more custodians.

- Recruit community members to function as bathroom attendants in order to discourage vandalism and rough housing.
- Create a time sheet for restroom use—this gives teachers a log for who is in the restroom at a certain time of the day.
- Create a graffiti wall just for students. Restrooms will be monitored so frequently that schools can develop a rapid response to obscene language or forms of vandalism.
- Decorate the bathrooms according to school colors and mascots. *Kids will take much better care of bathrooms that are personal to them. Kids cannot be expected to maintain bathrooms that are impersonal, smell bad and have holes in the walls.*
- Welcome student input when decorating bathrooms.
- Have an all-school meeting at all schools and make your own bathroom maintenance plan using our Rethinker ideas as a model.

(Hoang) Mr. Vallas, we heard you say at a community meeting that you would welcome community members to go to the RSD schools and examine the repairs you have done in bathrooms this summer. *We volunteer for that job and would be delighted to bring students from other groups along with us. We make the same offer to you, too, Mr. Kilbert, and to all the charter schools in this city.*

(Aaron) We hope this plan proves to you that we students are experts on our schools and are more than willing to help. Thank you.

Dudley C. Grady, Jr.

Rethinker recommendations and last words

Thanks Hoang and Aaron.

That's the end of our Rethinker presentations.

Before I hand over the mike to Global Green, Superintendent Vallas, Superintendent Kilbert and my own principal from Science and Math, Ms. Bridget Ramsey, I want to list here our Rethinker recommendations to all the public schools of New Orleans:

1. Repair all school bathrooms immediately and keep them clean.
2. Find money in the school budget to buy all bathroom supplies like toilet paper. Parents should not have to buy these items and students should not go without

them. Toilet paper, just like drinking water, should be a basic right for any human being attending a public school.

3. Redirect some money from security budgets to counselors and also janitors.
Nasty, smelly bathrooms in disrepair are violence against children. Use security money to put our bathrooms in order and keep them that way.
4. Let Rethink and other student groups monitor progress with our public school bathrooms on a regular basis.
5. Go green! Incorporate green aspects into public school bathroom repairs right now. Use the Rethink 21st century bathroom design for new public schools.

Now I would like to introduce Elizabeth Galante from Global Green USA.....