



Everything New Orleans

## What happens when charter schools close?

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**Sarah Carr, The Times-Picayune**

By

Nearly four years ago, teenagers Lynntrell Westbrook and Damonika Stokes took a chance on an ambitious new charter school that promised a rigorous high school curriculum combined with regular community-service activities.



Michael Democker, Times-Picayune

Students board buses to leave Sojourner Truth at the end of the school day Friday.

Leaders at Sojourner Truth Academy charter school visited their homes as part of a student recruiting drive in the summer of 2008 -- a personal touch that impressed the two girls.

"By the end of this conversation I was like, 'I *want* to go to this school,'" said Stokes, who started at Sojourner Truth as a freshman a few weeks later.

Now, as the final weeks of their senior year approach, the girls say the ambition and idealism that defined Sojourner Truth's founding have evaporated, at least partly because of a November decision to shut down at the end of this school year. The school's board of directors made the call because of persistently low test scores at the school. The Recovery School District, which

oversees Sojourner Truth, had told the board it would not recommend renewing its charter. The school is located Uptown at 2437 Jena St.

According to the accounts of three students, one of their parents and two staffers, nearly 20 staff members have left or been laid off since the summer, leaving several classrooms without qualified teachers; students spend portions of their school days playing cards, texting on their phones and milling around the building; and apart from a boys' baseball team and occasional outdoor excursions offered through an "adventure" club, Sojourner Truth has no real extracurricular activities anymore. It has also dropped many of its community service offerings, which some students said drew them to the school initially.

"It's pretty obvious we are getting cheated out of an education -- even I know that," said Stokes, 18. She has a scholarship to attend Bard College in New York next year, but worries she will be unprepared for some of her classes because of the chaos at Sojourner Truth. "When we go to college, we're not going to know any science," she said.

### Human toll of closures

Education leaders say it's inevitable that some percentage of New Orleans' charter schools will fail to live up to state standards and close. Already, the boards of Sojourner Truth and the New Orleans Free Academy have agreed to close their schools and the state has decided to hand over two other low-performing charters -- Harriet Tubman and McDonogh 42 -- to new operators.

Nationally, the charter movement is under pressure to close its weakest schools in order to improve overall quality. One of the **largest studies** of charter schools nationally found they perform slightly worse, on average, than traditional schools, though Louisiana was one of a handful of states where charters performed better. Even many charter advocates argue boards and charter authorizers need to be more proactive in closing their weakest schools.

According to a recent **report** from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, about 6 percent of charters up for renewal during the 2010-11 school year were closed, down from 8.8 percent the previous year.

But the experience of Sojourner Truth underscores the human toll of those closures, particularly if aggressive steps are not taken to ensure stability at a school in its final months. While there has been no consistent timetable for announcing school closings, RSD officials **have said** that they hope to inform families of school closures or takeovers as early in the year as possible. That means, however, that there could be more situations like that at Sojourner Truth, where a school community is left knowing it has no future for several months, and significant numbers of teachers and students leave as a result.

"There are still good teachers at the school who are trying every single day," said one staff member who did not want to be identified. "But in other cases, (the administration) is like, 'Who can we get to sit or stand in this classroom until the end of the year?'"

Bob Burvant, the chair of Sojourner Truth's board of directors, said the school still has "a number of dedicated teachers and administrators who are working under challenging circumstances." He added that the board and administration are trying their best to address issues, including finding replacement teachers, as they arise.

But he acknowledged the challenges. Not only does pending closure make it harder to retain and replace teachers, it can also cause budget issues, he said. It's difficult, if not impossible, to raise money for a school that's closing. And students transfer to new schools, lowering the amount of money the school receives from the state for the second half of the year. Most New Orleans charters also receive federal start-up grants that usually last only three years; in Sojourner Truth's case, they expired at the end of last school year.

One of the staff members said the school is "so broke" that there are no paper towels in the restrooms.

Sojourner Truth opened in 2008 under the leadership of Channa Cook, a young educator who moved to New Orleans from California to open a charter school focused on social justice and community service. Cook left after three years at the helm, and the board hired a new principal, Reginald Flenory.

Flenory clashed with several teachers, several of whom left as a result. Flenory has been on a leave of absence since February, according to the staff and students. He could not be reached for comment.

According to the staff and students, those who left, or were laid off, since the summer include two Spanish teachers, the geometry teacher, two algebra teachers, the civics teacher, the English II teacher, the operations manager, the finance director and the school nurse, among several others.

Some have been replaced; others have not.

### **Rules, learning dissipate**

Westbrook, who is 17, said she has four hour-and-a-half classes each day: math, science, computers and fine arts. She said the math teacher covers a lot of material and she learns "a little" in science, but the fine arts and computer classes are almost devoid of substance. "I can't even tell you what fine arts is," she said. "There are just people playing cards."

Westbrook, Stokes and their classmate Breion Burns, 18, say the school has little structure in place this year. Many students stopped wearing their uniforms and show up in jeans or yoga pants instead. Some students wear their uniforms anyway, to protect what little school spirit is left.

In the past "you couldn't take your phone out," said Westbrook. "This year you can text in class. I talk on the phone in the hallway and we have very few teachers."

Stokes said Sojourner Truth "wasn't perfect" in past years, "But it was a school: We had rules. We learned. We had to wear uniforms."

Anna Burns, Breion's mother, said she tried to take her daughter out early in the school year, but no other school would recognize her as a senior; they all wanted her to repeat junior year.

It bothers her that so many teachers have departed. But she said she understands they "have bills to pay of their own."

"They have a life, too," said Westbrook. "With the school closing, they know they are going to be out of a job."

Burvant said the RSD has hosted school fairs for Sojourner Truth's underclassmen and plans to give them priority in the application process for next year.

In many respects, the closure has been hardest on the seniors, particularly those like Westbrook and Stokes, who have spent their entire high school careers at Sojourner Truth; unlike the vast majority of the school's teachers and administrators, they were there as the school came into existence and as it faded away.

"By us being seniors, we will be the first graduating class -- that's something," said Burns.

"We want to stick it out," added Stokes. "We dared to be there when it first opened. And we'll dare to be there when it first closes."

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