

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# New Orleans Is No Education 'Miracle'

By **Linda Tran**

As a recent graduate of a New Orleans public high school, I find it very troubling that the national conversation about post-Katrina education amounts to little more than talking points about charter schools and test scores. The most telling indication of how we're doing in the classroom actually comes from a youth-led research project showing the hard realities students continue to face every day. As New Orleans moves to become the first all-charter district in the country, students here must be heard. [← Back to Story](#)

The Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association, or VAYLA, surveyed **a cross section of 450 students** from six different public high schools among the schools overseen by the Orleans Parish school board and those in the state's Recovery School District, or RSD, asking students for their opinions on everything from counselor availability and teacher effectiveness to school lunches and safety. Published this September, the surveys and testimony that VAYLA gathered contain more than 25,000 student observations. These student voices echo the feelings of many of us yearning to be heard by policymakers.

Louisiana education officials promised to build a world-class public school system after Katrina. But the survey shows that the historic inequalities faced by students of color and those from low-income communities were not washed away by the floodwaters.

An Orleans Parish charter school with a significant white population received high marks across the board, while the remaining five schools averaged what amounts to a C or D in areas like safety, academic rigor, counselor accessibility, classroom management, physical environment, and affordability. I can personally attest to how much these challenges impact a student's ability to learn, grow, and earn the right to walk across that stage on graduation day.

Even though math and reading scores have improved in New Orleans, the challenge that traps so many people my age is the lack of a high school diploma or at least one that truly represents the education necessary to succeed in life. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, one of every six New Orleans high schools fails to graduate at least 40 percent of its students. By 2018, **about 3 million U.S. jobs** will be available without enough college educated workers to apply, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Our economic future demands more from our education system and so should we. A majority of the high school students who responded to the VAYLA survey said they did not feel their school was preparing them for college; over 60 percent of students said they complete less than one hour of homework each night; and 20 percent of students also said they have never visited an academic counselor. Schools must find a way to support students with after-school study halls, Advanced Placement course offerings, accessible counselors, and other services that prepare them for college and careers.

As a student-advocacy organization, VAYLA recognizes that teachers and administrators cannot do it all on their own. Parents need to be engaged in the education process. One of the major barriers is language, with 50 percent of limited-English-proficient parents having never even met their kids' teachers. Bilingual school staff and translation services would enable limited-English families to get

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involved and stay involved. Furthermore, an online parent portal would give working parents the chance to monitor their children's progress.

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Like many others, the schools VAYLA studied are in desperate need of new models that support English-language learners. The results indicate that nearly 70 percent of Asian and Latino students responding reported having been placed in an English-as-a-second-language class that did not fit their needs. Each of these students has a different level of proficiency, requiring tailored instruction. We must do more to ensure that every ESL class has a teacher who is certified in this field.

Hopefully, we can also agree to do something about the one in four students who report that they feel "unsafe" at school. We would know so much more about the dangers that exist if schools reported incidents of harassment and bullying. Without spending a penny, students and security-staff members could create a safety commission at each school to develop better solutions that do not rely on punishments and harsh discipline. Providing more counseling options would give students with emotional or social challenges the support they need to prevent dangerous behavior.

Other issues continue to hold students back, but no one looking at New Orleans' schools seems to see what is actually happening on the ground: Sixty percent of students surveyed don't use the restrooms at their schools; 70 percent of students say their classes do not have enough textbooks for every student; and half of students do not eat lunch every day. These are basic problems that still exist.

Six years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' public high schools are still plagued by severe inequities. Just talk to the students.

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*Editor's Note: Abramson Science and Technology Charter School lost its charter in August 2011 and is now Abramson Science and Technology School in the Recovery School District.*