

Sent via e-mail and U. S. Mail

July 29, 2011

Members of the Orleans Parish School Board
Superintendent Darryl C. Kilbert
3520 General DeGaulle Drive
New Orleans, LA 70114

Members of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
Ms. Ollie S. Tyler, Acting State Superintendent of Education
c/o Catherine Pozniak
1201 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5243

Superintendent John White
Recovery School District
1641 Poland Ave.
New Orleans, LA 70117

Re: Proposed Amendments to School Facilities Master Plan

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) are scheduled to vote on the proposed changes to the School Facilities Master Plan in August. They should not do so. Rather, the Recovery School District (RSD) and OPSB should go back to the drawing board. Acting with urgency, they should produce a plan that sets forth the number of school facilities and schools the public should expect in the future, and that provides a reasonable-quality school facility for every child. And they should do so within the confines of the remaining construction funds. Future tax capacity should be reserved for other needs, such as maintenance and educational needs.

Three years ago, the RSD and the OPSB released the School Facilities Master Plan. The 10-year plan called for building or renovating 87 schools at a total cost of \$2 billion. Since then, FEMA has finalized its commitment to the school systems, agreeing to provide \$2 billion. In addition, the school systems have received \$137 million in Community Development Block Grants, bringing total federal funding for facilities to \$2.1 billion. Approximately one-fourth of the total has been used for immediate post-disaster needs and emergency renovations.

The balance, roughly \$1.6 billion, should be enough to build schools where needed and carry out necessary renovations. Indeed, based on the projected 2020 enrollment and national norms, the funds should be enough build a brand-new school for every single student in the system. They equate to more than \$33,000 per pupil.¹ The national and the regional medians for high school construction are \$30,833 and \$29,545, respectively. Elementary schools generally cost even less per pupil – \$25,500 at the national median and \$18,939 at the regional median.²

Yet, in the two initial phases of the amended plan, the \$1.6 billion would meet the needs of only 54 school facilities. Renovation and construction of another 19 school facilities included in Phase III, at an estimated cost of \$422 million, would be contingent on taxpayers footing the bill for a bond issue. Other currently occupied facilities are simply unaccounted for in the amendments. The three phases of the master plan address only 73 facilities, while there are currently 85 RSD or OPSB schools operating and an additional three BESE Type 2 charter schools in RSD/OPSB facilities.

Given the amount of funding available from federal sources for construction, it is astonishing that full execution of the plan depends on a major bond issue and tax levy. Using the community's tax capacity this way is also unwise, since there is currently no funding source for maintenance and serious unmet educational needs.

The proposed amendments are silent on a critical decision-making factor: the number and types of schools the RSD and OPSB expect to house. Rather, the amendments set up a disparity without explanation. They call for funding a total of 73 schools, with money guaranteed for only 54; however, the RSD and OPSB currently have 85 schools in operation.

The amended plan declares its intention to provide “equity in the quality of school buildings.”³ But unless taxpayers chip in significant additional funds and the RSD or OPSB close a significant number of schools currently in operation, the amendments would not do so. Instead, the amended plan would create gross inequity in the quality of school facilities across the city. Some school facilities would be built at a cost that far exceeds national norms. Others would get nothing, even where repairs are urgently needed.

With more than \$1.6 billion to address the city's public school facility needs, it is unacceptable that the amended plan would not place all students in reasonable facilities that provide a good educational environment.

Fairness and good stewardship require major changes to the plan and its implementation:

- **First, the plan must clearly indicate how many schools it expects to house.**

¹ BGR calculation based on 2020 moderate projected enrollment for elementary school and high schools in “Proposed Master Plan Amendments,” Recovery School District and Orleans Parish School Board, p. 10.

² Abramson, Paul, “2011 Annual School Construction Report,” *School Planning & Management*, February 2011, pp. 5 and 15.

³ “Proposed Master Plan Amendments,” p. 2.

- **Second, using the ample existing funds, the plan must provide all students with reasonable facilities and a good education environment. At a minimum, each needed facility should be stabilized and suffer from no major defects in structure, infrastructure or safety.**
- **Third, the plan must be made cost-effective.**
- **Fourth, the RSD and OPSB should appoint a highly qualified task force to develop a creative, efficient funding program for future maintenance and capital repair needs.**

To achieve cost efficiency and provide for all students, architectural dreams and luxuries may have to yield to affordability, equity and a more utilitarian approach. Changes in design, specifications, size and amenities will be necessary. And a more efficient construction delivery system must be implemented. For example, it may be necessary to:

- Develop flexible prototypes for new schools of the same program capacity.
- Create flexible floor plans and spaces within schools.
- Reduce the square footage per student.
- Standardize mechanical and electrical systems.
- Focus more on the basic elements of energy efficiency and structural sustainability, rather than on meeting LEED-certification (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) requirements.
- Reduce the scope of renovations and focus first on stabilizing the fundamentals (such as roofs, foundations, plumbing, electrical, and health and safety concerns).

The RSD and OPSB should provide detailed responses to the values and recommendations of the peer review committees that examined the plan, indicating which will be incorporated into the amended master plan and providing the reasons for those that are rejected.

All public bodies must live within their means. When doing so, they must make difficult decisions, and perfect equity is impossible. But New Orleans can do far better by its schools and students than the proposed amendments anticipate.

Every child, and every school, deserves a decent facility. Using available funds, New Orleans has a unique and realistic opportunity to rebuild its entire school facilities network – not just some of it.

Sincerely yours,

Bureau of Governmental Research



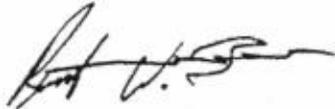
By: Janet R. Howard
President & CEO

**Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
of Louisiana**



By: Darlene A. Kattan
Executive Director

**Business Council of New Orleans
and the River Region**



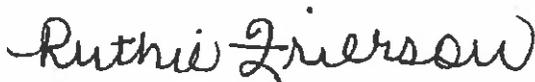
By: Robert W. Brown
Managing Director

New Orleans Chamber of Commerce



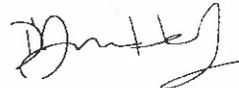
By: G. Ben Johnson
President & CEO

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans



By: Ruthie Frierson
Founder and Chairman

**New Orleans Regional Black
Chamber of Commerce**



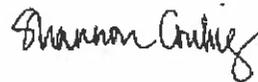
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**Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public
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By: Shannon Couhig
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cc: Siona LaFrance
Stan Smith