

**NPN & OPEN Town Hall Forum on School Governance
February 23, 2011
Wilson Elementary School**

Opening Remarks

Timolynn Sams – Executive Director of Neighborhoods Partnership Network (NPN)
... Each month, NPN with partners lead a roundtable discussion on _____
“Once we have this conversation it won’t end here. We will take the conversation and weave through it.”

Deirdre Johnson-Burel – Executive Director of Orleans Public Education Network
OPEN –
We are here tonight to ask, “What are the common issues facing this community?”
There is a bit of a challenge around community voice, transparency and accountability to show how communities can influence decision-makers.

Each community will share how they engaged the RSD and then we will talk about ways that we can collectively collaborate. OPEN is serving as a catalyst for broad and collaborative discussions about education in the City.

If you have not heard about it yet, contact us for more information about our One-Step Campaign. *Description*

Lakshmi and Mary, Policy Associate and Policy Coordinator of our two organizations will provide you with more on what we will talk about tonight.

Mary—(powerpoint presentation) We have two school systems operating in New Orleans. The RSD and OPSB cross neighborhood boundaries – so school options get very complex and complicated. The big question is: Who is making the decisions in both situations?

(referring to the chart)

The first is the Recovery School District – it took over 100 schools after Hurricane Katrina though they [the RSD] existed before the storm.

Then there is the OPSB; governed by an elected school board. They directly operate four schools and are the operator of charters.

So there are multiple school districts and a mix of direct-run and charter-run schools. That is the OPSB and RSD and Lakshmi from NPN will tell you more about the framework for tonight’s discussion.

Lakshmi: We have realized as community-based non-profits that we can _____. We're hoping to achieve bringing voices to the table and to also have opportunities for communities to ... dialogue.

(from the powerpoint)

Tonight's objectives are to initiate a dialogue among schools facing similar challenges, find opportunities for collaboration, and develop a framework for community engagement that everyone can use to both select and evaluate schools.

On tonight's panel we have representatives from Colton Middle School, Franz Elementary, Priestley High School in the Carrollton area, and Sarah T. Reed in New Orleans East.

"At NPN, we have a four part process that starts with initial assessment. It then goes on to Capacity Building/Problem - Solving, to Networking, then to Evaluation and monitoring."

"We're in Capacity Building and Problem Solving stage tonight." For the initial assessment, we at NPN and OPEN met with each of the communities individually to assess how each community

(presented the problems/ Common Challenges -- FOUR Points from the slides

"Each of the communities will speak for about 10 minutes to talk about the different challenges that you are facing with your school." We also want to note that we recognize that these are some, though not all, of the voices of the community and that we are not here tonight to say that a group is right or wrong but to focus on _____.

COLTON SCHOOL

Michael - Colton School - We talked about issues around Colton school as well as the school. "It's located in Marginy where the 7th Ward, St. Roch and Bywater are all involved even though the school is located in the Marginy."

"It is really a unique place in the city that allows for different communities in the area to come together in a way that we don't typically see in New Orleans."

I am from South Louisiana and dreamed of moving to New Orleans. After Katrina it seemed like "everyone was offered this amazing opportunity to make this city better - to re-evaluate the city's problems."

We had a Quick Start Grant funding opportunity - there were community members downtown who worked to make it [the school] a community based- arts facility. One-per council district was approved. It started this conversation that there could be a community based school that would bring together all these things the

community groups bring to the table.

Our conversations went into the UNOP plan. There was a consistent community voice – we needed a place to bring these creative voices together. All these groups that made up the community said – and it went into the UNOP – that these communities *want* a place for people to come together creatively. People wanted to come together with these creative ideas they had.

With the master plan, Colton School was listed as a K-8 school. We started going to construction meetings. There were great plans. What we were talking about was who is going to actually run the school. You're putting together this great facility, but you're [the RSD] was not telling us about the mechanism that was coming next – who's operating it. They said we'd get time to have public opinion. We had the opportunity to speak to Mr. Vallas – we talked to him for 20 minutes and afterwards he said, 'We've already decided who's going to be there. You can work on making it a great community school with who is already been decided – but that's it. If you have a problem with it you can talk with BESE.' We talked to neighbors and are asking, _____.

Community wants one thing and bureaucrats on the other side want other things. In our community neighbors are coming together to ask residents block-by-block what they want. The RSD isn't doing that. And there are other people all over the city trying to do the same thing.

It's a great problem to have that we're here. It's a great thing that we're here [tonight]. But [to the RSD] ASK us how we can be involved. Instead of telling us we have a say when things are decided behind closed doors. We hope this event will be a movement in a right direction.

____ (Colton School Rep. #2) I am a parent and educator. I am a New Orleanian. And a product of New Orleans Public Schools. It was a fascinating process of seeing all of the things coming together. Going into all of the neighborhoods and talking to people. "It's been very enlightening to find that so many people want the same things."

We all want a choice. A real choice. But are we really being given a choice when all of the operators in our area are the same thing?

FRANTZ ELEMENTARY

Katherine Prevost – "Our area was totally destroyed by Katrina. We don't have any schools in our neighborhoods and the two schools that are supposed to come back are Frantz and Lockett. Frantz is historic. And we wanted the school to come back cause we didn't have anything for the children in the neighborhood. The kids are waiting for buses in the cold and in the rain to be bussed out. It's not holistic. It's not healthy. Parents started asking – why can't our kids go to Frantz first?"

We now found out that it's not Paul Vallas' plan. It was ok for him to make plans on how the building was going to be built and for us to ask questions then and be involved. But when we asked about our kids attending the schools and the choice for our schools, it's different."

"The Master Plan says there will be neighborhood schools. But what is a neighborhood school? Is it one where children can walk to school? ... is it one where kids have to be bussed to school? ... it's really turning into a business."

"This is the constant thing we've been battling. Why do children have to go so far to get an education? We find that we're fighting this battle now. Should it be chartered or should it be something else? It's really a battle between the neighborhoods and the residents and the school boards."

PRIESTLEY SCHOOL

Dr. Mary Green was Board secretary of Priestley School –

From the presentation I documented "Voice. Transparency. And Process."
When the Carrollton area got together before the storm, the community voice was loud and clear. We wanted Priestley. Carrollton went door-to-door times three to ask the community what they wanted. They wanted a place not only to educate the students but to educate the parents and community with offerings and programs at night. They wanted the building to be viable.

What we were doing was things we did before hurricane Katrina – and we were made many promises. Before Katrina things were said and were decided on one thing.

"We weren't asking for a hand out. After the storm KIPP had consumed our entire building. So we went to St. Henry's. It couldn't accommodate two schools. But we made it work. So we were there for two years in the cafeteria. We were moved again to Palmyra St. It was the Old Orleans Parish Health Building on Palmyra. We didn't have enough grades but we made it work."

We kept having these dialogs – we didn't know where we went. We were in constant conflict with our program being OPSB and the buildings being controlled by RSD. I'm confused and I'm an educated woman!

As a psych nurse – if you continually move me, I can't process. This was a major problem [for our school]. But we persevered. And the grades were going up and up.

Excellence and Equity were our goals. Our students have worked with major construction companies and engineering firms. Priestly students have worked on the Pitot house. We were excelling but now we are in Louis___ in modulars.

SARAH T. REED

Norm Whitley is board member of New Orleans East Charter Academies

We wanted to run the high school ourselves. So in the spring of 2008 – we went forward.

There's an academy of engineering, biomedical technology and _____. Each is limited to 300 students.

Within these three academies we're offering a curriculum that is standard across the board. We are not promising that everyone is going to college, but we're going to educate people in these disciplines so they can be a contributor in those industries for the rest of their lives and in their communities.

We needed elementary schools that could feed that high school [program].

We went into New Orleans East and looked for a school – we wrote an application and were turned down by BESE. We re-tried and got together with one group. Sarah T. Reed bought into it and we all affirmed that that's what they and what we all wanted to do. [for the elementary and middle school to feed into the high school].

Those two follow-up applications were also turned down by the BESE.

We have serious qualms and there are serious problems that need to be fixed. Since that time, we have been focusing on pursuing Sarah T. Reed High School. But we're also trying to build community engagement for the elementary school – whether we charter it or not, isn't the main issue. Now going to be run by the charter group – ReNew. We had a great meeting with ReNew that was chosen by the RSD. We just want the community to be involved in the school that is there.

DEIRDRE-

Thanks to the groups for sharing their stories.

Discussion: What was the process you all engaged in to frame the vision of those schools? To Colton School: What kind of school do you want?

Michael Pizzolato from Colton: Our process really just started with neighbor-to-neighbor conversation. When you talk to people there are consistent answers. There's an interest in the same type of curriculum. We live in a very walkable area and a very walkable city. Apparently 90% of the kids are bussed. Knowing the kids and the parents that are in your child's class as being anchors in the community are things that made up our conversations.

We had regular meetings, but we still have meetings where we talk about community vision – people get to talk about what they want to see. Anyone can see it on coltonschool.org. Our letters, weekly meeting dates, and agendas are up there. We're making it a very transparent process. Since no one else is doing that.

We'd like to create a framework for different operators. We're not looking for a stem curriculum. We want to be able to ask Operators - how are you navigating the diversity in the area? The RSD describes a neighborhood zone as a ½ mile radius around the school. In that ½ mile zone around our school 46% is black. 43% is white. The remaining percentage is mixed race and other. The neighborhood already has the diversity. **We're asking that question of diversity asking everyone – in the bars in the restaurants, asking the questions.**

There is ___ million dollars being spent on Colton School. There are people that live four blocks away, who don't know that that much money is being invested in the school. That the government's spending a lot of money to rebuild this school *and they should know that.*

Deirdre of OPEN to the Rep. of Frantz School: Would you tell us what type of investments have you as a community already made to the children in that neighborhood?

Katherine Prevost: We have invested at the park where the children play. There are all the kids at Bunny Friend park, they have had to find things to do. So we had to put resources there for them. People started working together to help the children in school, too. All the children come to and work with Baptist Crossroads Church and Bunny Friend Neighborhood Association. We try to make everything walkable. We found a place at the Entergy Innovation Center to do programs, too.

Deirdre to Mary Green of Priestley School: To Priestley School: for you, this conversation is about connecting the dots. What does success look like for the Carrollton United Group at the stage where you are?

Mary Green of Priestley School: "Success would look like a building where the students could actually attend for more than 10 months. A stable place where they could stay. It would look like continuing the relationship with Tulane School of Engineering and Architecture. Continuing the connection with SUNO. Continued field trips. They've even gone to Rome to look at Architecture. It would also look like people school board visiting our school – [success would look like] having our superintendent and people from the school board coming by and talking to the students in Priestley and showing an interest in the students.

Deirdre to Norm Whitley of Sarah T. Reed: – Why did you as a community decide it was important that the Reed school become a charter school? How did you get to that decision?

Norm Whitley of Sarah T. Reed: We wanted a consortium of elementary schools so they [students] would be ready for the high school – and we wanted to tackle the middle school along the way. So we wanted a comprehensive program that went from kindergarten to high school.

When we found out there was going to be an operator going to Sarah T. Reed School, we tried to react as quickly as possible to get the stakeholders together.

We came up with a set of questions and sent them to the community and we sent them to the CMOs – and we wanted them to come to the meeting with answers to these questions. We gave everyone in the audience a rate sheet. We sent it to all of these different groups so they would see how the community thought the CMOs would run the schools. And everyone felt good [about the process]. I didn't want the meeting to turn into a shouting or hate match. In the end everyone felt like they'd participated and they were heard. The communities and the CMOs liked the process.

Deirdre to all of the Panelists and audience/community – There are two core things here: How can the lessons your organizations has learned help build the capacity of all of us and move us forward? Collectively there are resources in the community that we can each leverage. How can we leverage those common interests so we can move forward?

Question from the audience/community about creating neighborhood catchment zone. Would a law concerning charter schools have to be changed?

Panelist from Colton School: There are different answers from different places. State rules within BESE or the RSD have to be changed to make that happen. There is a rule that's preventing it, but it's not a law. We were told different things different steps of the way.

Audience/Community Member: Maybe everyone needs to be defining what that catchment zone is.

Another Community member and Karen Harper Royal: There are two laws at play here. Federal Charter school law and state level charter school law. If it's a charter school – the schools HAVE to have open enrollment if it's by [according to] federal law. At the state level – where I tried to put a bill – what was passed in the end was a little different: a charter school could amend its charter so it could leave 30% of its seats to neighborhood children. What the law is now contradicts a bit with federal law.

Karran Harper-Royal: Federal law allows there to be an extra weight in the lottery for the kids in the neighborhoods, but [at the core of the issue] the children still have to compete for seats in their own neighborhoods. This is one of those issues that has to be dealt with through the legislature.

It may need to be worked out through the courts that it needs to be more than 30%. People want choice, but they also want the option of neighborhood schools. We may want to consider bringing in the federal interests.

Participant/Audience Member: Louisiana law originally said so many of a percentage of people in the community had to vote on ____ – and that’s what each group said. In Louisiana, BESE decided that we were going to call some schools “failing schools.” So when you get a failing schools, that’s when then the state gets to take the schools over. They has options for how to deal with these failing schools and picked the charter schools option with takeover ... but the law in Louisiana didn’t originally say that [that had to be the case]. And the operators are all for profit.

Once they took them over – they made adjustments to the law.

Participant/Audience Member: Correction, I work for a charter school and all charter schools are not for-profit. Charter schools are non-profit.

Other Audience Members: (concurring) Yes, most area non-profit.

Audience Member: We need the choice of all good schools.

Katherine Prevost, Rep. of Frantz School: They’re using our schools as dump sites. They’re taking schools out of portables and putting them into Frantz school. Charter schools weren’t here pre-Katrina. And parents don’t have control over the system. Transportation is not good. Paul Vallas ____

Audience Member: We should forget about Paul Vallas ...

Participant/Audience Member: (Nicole Bouy – *Take out of the record*) I was a former social worker at Colton School pre-Katrina. I’m working with RSD currently. You cannot forget about Paul Vallas – he is running this system, so we have to work with him. We do not have enough resources. The money is not being given out equally. In school like Craig and Carver – we need more assistance, more parents involved. We need them and those resources [from the RSD] have been given to other schools. It’s unfair that our schools are lacking. My niece attends a great public RSD school but why can’t Johnson, McMMain, and Drew kids get those same things. We can’t forget about Paul Vallas. He’s everywhere.

Participant: What is the accountability process? We've been getting the opinions ... and we go to these meetings and we hear the promises but where is the accountability?

Community Member: The Boards of [these charter] schools have no parents. There are no people on the board that really understand what parents go through. At my child's school, I haven't found one person who sits on a board who has to catch the bus to the meetings. 60% of those whose children go to the school have to catch the bus to go to those school board meetings.

Your voice is limited 'cause others have signed up and people who don't even go to those schools seem to be heard while the parents of most of the kids who go there aren't.

Mary Green of Priestley: We did have representation from the community to the school board. That's why we thought our voice was very clear. Well, they heard us. Our voice was very clear- but we were ignored.

Rep from Colton School: Since most people we are dealing with here are elected officials and not appointed we have a say. Going after your elected officials and making them hear you is very important.

Audience Member: We have two choices: Neighborhood based schools and open enrollment? Can they co-exist? As a community member and teacher - we're having a problem of just open enrollment or the other. With residential segregation already at play - a zip code shouldn't determine educational opportunities. There is pride in community here. There are strong neighborhood identities. Identities and neighborhoods that people are proud of and like. Because New Orleans has so many charter schools, what do we do in this position? Can they [parents] send their kid down the street and also send them to the schools way down the street if they want?

Timolynn of NPN: At the end, we want to call for a framework of community engagement.

PARTICIPANT (Ms. Jean Fischer): Carrollton currently has no open enrollment high school. So Priestley was a plus. At the same time, Priestley does not have its community. It doesn't have it. I've told you don't let it go [move to another place] cause then it loses the community spirit. -- as it moves from one part of the city to another.

Timolynn of NPN: *Introduced Karen Harper Royal.* Though she is very passionate about her own child, she is a strong advocate for quality schools and for all children.

Karran Harper Royal: “Thanks for having me here and for having the community here. For those of us who made the choice to come back, we knew we’d have to roll up our sleeves and work. That’s what I hear from the panel. You’ve rolled up your sleeves and worked and your voices have fallen onto deaf ears. You’ve been forced to go with a decision led by the Recovery School District. They asked me to talk about the journey – of my being in this work.”

“In 1992 I had a choice to have my kid go to a neighborhood school or to 20-something schools of choice, and I chose _____. I chose that school. When I found out he didn’t sit at circle time and I got very involved with his school. Schools just didn’t work for lots of active boys and children.”

“Fast forward to after Katrina -- I knew I had to help re-build my neighborhood. It’s only about 40% rebuilt. We also wrote a vision for a quick-start school. We got our neighborhood group – and our vision *was* funded. It was funded for a small technology high school. And it started off good, but things with the RSD went horribly off track.”

We were told [by the RSD] ‘your community can drive this, it can be like Chicago.’ When went to the offices ... and we were told again: no your community *is* driving this. After they tried to access the funds of the grant, we were told we’d have to charter the schools.

Communities should have real input. We find that our voice matters if it co-signs with what the district [has already] decided.

“About the Priestly building... I remember when they were fighting for that building. The RSD decided for another group to go in that building. Colton flanked by KIPP. The community is being forced fed a 3rd KIPP school. For Frantz, the vision is clear. Then ____ said Benjamin Mays going in that building. RSD had 5 community meetings – in each case, a program was put into a building and your voice didn’t matter. For the District E building, the ReNew School wasn’t even listed in the handout. But was printed in the paper recently. If you came to the building facilities meetings last month you even didn’t know you needed to protest. So *how* are our voices really heard?” There’ a meeting a Clark school right now about being force fed this charter or that charter. When you have this number of charter choices, we don’t have the option to *not* choose and go with a community school.

It seems like “You’ve driven the train to rebuild your own neighborhoods, but you can’t drive the train to build your communities’ schools.”

I remember early on with the Steve Binger group, we were presented with beautiful options, but those plans were like a bad dream. We need to see how our voices were actually tracked out. I went to every meeting around school assignments. And the people’s voices weren’t reflected in the papers that were handed out. Just Monday, the building assignments didn’t match up to what they said would happen at the community meetings.

I think it's important that we hold the State Department of Education accountable while we have elected school board members -- who don't have control over most of the schools we're worried about.

We have one person on the BESE board – Louella Gibbions. She's only one voice among the 11 though. So our vote on what happens is _____. I feel like this amounts to taxation without representation. *(applause from the audience/community)*
There's a thing called the voting rights act. If we really look at how our voices have been diluted, I think it's time for us to say stop and wait (?).

We need to talk about which changes we need to make to which laws in the community. There are two more weeks before a vote in Baton Rouge, and I'm happy to meet with more people to hear about what the community wants.

Who decided that all enrollment would be open enrollment and 50% would be the percentage? We heard it would be a community decision. And the community said it would be great. I was told later that it was decided by ____.

“We need to be making sure our voices were heard in meaningful ways.”

Deirdre: Let's talk about the strengths and weaknesses in our processes.

Colton community for example has a clear vision. Can that type of process be used by any other group?

(written on the board)

HOW CAN WE COLLABORATE TO HAVE VOICES HEARD?

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

(quiet from the audience/community and panelists ... some discussion)

Participant from the Community: We should go Egypt.

Another Participant from the Community: I won't go Egypt but I will go Wisconsin. What will it take to stop the current assignments? As we speak people are getting ready to move supplies.

If we can't communicate here, we can't communicate anywhere. The point is the children. I want kids in Carrollton to be able to go to school. I want kids in New Orleans' East to be able to go to school. And so on. Our goal should be to make it happen. So our goal has to be that.

Our charge is to figure out: What is best for EACH community.

Participant/Community Member: We need to make the point that the people who make the decisions are here. We need to talk to them. I can sue them but I can also talk the dollars and cents with these guys. You all need to talk to them.

RSD Representative: There was no need to ____

Participant/Community Member (again): You weren't even paying attention. (argument)

RSD Representative 1 in audience (Randy): I was writing notes ...

Exchange of words/argument between Community Member and RSD Representative 1

Michael Pizzolato from Colton School: We need to recognize there's all this great energy here. [to the RSD representatives] I disagree with the decisions you've made. We want to work together and make this great. We're not going to be here in the next couple decades. It's just a professional reality. We need to be able to work together... Even if I cannot get what I want out of it...but there has to be a *process*. I really appreciate the difficulties y'all have had to go through. I can't imagine the hours you've put in. But when we've been told there's been a process, but then we're told that there was a decision I made by Paul Vallas two years ago ... ____

Timolynn: We're reminding you that NPN is hosting this forum as a safe space where all of us and all of our voices can be heard. We do have representatives here from the RSD. Would you like to say something?

RSD Representative 1 in audience: I appreciate the format ... really I appreciate the format. I appreciate a lot of what you've had to say tonight. I apologize that I have reacted in a way. I was frankly here to listen. I was here to listen. I was taking notes. So that's what I was doing at the time.

RSD Representative 2 in audience: To tag on what Randy said, we make an effort to attend as many meetings as we can. The three of us aren't always the ones to make the decisions. We've been taking notes here all night long. We're going to take the notes back to the people we need to. We met with Mr. Pastorek this afternoon. We know those ongoing community conversations are trying to be rekindled in areas of the city where they may have been lost.

Deirdre: There is power in the voice. Framing the process that we want is as important as being heard. What is the process that we want? What are the criteria? Clear and transparent criteria. A timeline for how that gets heard is put into place and space for community places to get heard.

We hope to leverage the neighborhoods through NPN and OPEN to help develop the framework that can be made through the dialogue and discussions.

Question on how we move forward from Diedra, again.

Rep. from Priestley School: While we're doing this ... the decisions are being made.

Deirdre: We're talking 30 – 40 days, right Lakshmi?

Karran Harper Royal: Even though these decisions are made ... nothing's finalized until BESE votes on it.

Katherine Prevost from Frantz School: How can we stop what's happening with the schools right now? How can we make it so the voice is heard – really heard and the community has input? Who is going to help us push this initiative forward?

Participant from the Audience: We have a lot of people here, a lot of different agencies – Colton [for example] is capturing the people that come in and disseminating information. I think if we could create another forum and post all of this in the lobby – so we can engage in having additional conversations.

Deirdre: The two organizations OPEN and NPN will publish and distribute this information. We're asking people to help move the conversation through the advocacy committee of NPN and our organization is in the middle of the One-step campaign. Vision has to be owned by the community. We're asking everyone to be a part of framing that vision. If you're not familiar with One-Step please contact us.

As for action: we will move this forward and will let you know when you can engage in further discussions. And make sure this is ____.

Timolynn: This is a reliving of what NPN's true vision is. Keeping communities engaged in civic processes. This document we are producing is engaged – it is a live process. It's a continuum.

Write to advocacy@nppnola.com if you think of something about what was said tonight, you can send it there. If you think of strengths and weaknesses you want to be in the documents you can send it there. We send documents to elected officials. We will send it with Karran to state legislatures so they will know what the community has to say.