

**Hearing Testimony of Louisiana State Superintendent of Education Paul G. Pastorek
U.S. Senate Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery
December 10, 2009**

Good Afternoon.

I am Paul G. Pastorek, Louisiana State Superintendent of Education. I would like to thank Senator Landrieu and the members of the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery for exploring opportunities to more effectively support students and families who are impacted by disasters. Unfortunately, in recent years, Louisiana has experienced several events that have led to displacing our students for an extended period of time, and in some cases permanently. With that in mind, I appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on what is working and what challenges we continue to face under such circumstances.

Having served as State Superintendent of Education since March 2007, coupled with my eight-year role as a member of our state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and one of the founders of a statewide educational nonprofit, I have worked closely with state leaders around the country, particularly in the Gulf South, as well as extensively with state, local and school leaders in Louisiana as we attempted to respond to the numerous and diverse challenges that disrupt the education and quality of life of children when disaster strikes their homes and communities.

Today I will focus on the systematic strengths, deficiencies and resulting changes and needs that we have encountered primarily due to our experiences after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I would like to share with you what worked well, the adjustments we've made to improve since that time and our existing needs to adequately equip the education community to respond to disasters.

Student Information Systems

About 700 schools in Louisiana and Mississippi were damaged or destroyed and over 370,000 students in the two states were displaced after Katrina. In Louisiana, the storm displaced about 200,000 public school students—more than 26 percent of our state's pre-storm enrollment.

By September 2005, every state in the nation had received at least one hurricane-displaced student and 12 states had received more than 1,000. A large number of students, 45,000, relocated to Texas or to other parts of Louisiana. While the Texas and Louisiana education communities welcomed these students with open arms, we were unprepared to transition such a large number of students to other communities in such a short time-frame.

Monitoring and transitioning displaced students after a crisis requires excellent planning, effective communication, and high-quality data. School leaders need accurate data to inform student placement, deliver appropriate educational services, adjust school management practices, allocate disaster-relief funding and track student performance. Fortunately, in Louisiana, some student information, such as testing data, grade level, course history and program participation, was housed at the state level, but in several different pieces in various offices. We did not have

files that linked all of the relevant information for each individual student. During the first few days immediately following the storms, our offices received thousands upon thousands of telephone calls from receiving districts and other states who were requesting demographic and other important student information that simply did not exist in an easily accessible format. Within a few days, we were able to utilize existing data that had been collected at the state level to create a temporary information database. This allowed us to provide receiving administrators with access to basic student demographic information. But at that point, we recognized a critical need for our state to have appropriate mechanisms in place to address these kinds of emergencies, especially considering that many of our districts were not operational for months.

An even bigger challenge surfaced around the lack of specific student information. For example, the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which outline the prescribed needs of exceptional students, were not stored electronically at the state level. Therefore, receiving districts and states were forced to do new evaluations and IEPs for thousands of students. In the meantime, these students went without the services until their needs could be appropriately identified. You might imagine how that could make a tragic event in the life of a child even more tragic.

Although Louisiana was already working toward implementing an electronic data management system for all student records, Katrina and Rita highlighted the need to maintain electronic files of student records, such as IEPs, ensuring accessibility and portability of crucial student information.

Emergency Impact Aid

School districts across Louisiana and other states quickly responded to enroll displaced students into their schools, but many struggled to offset the costs of absorbing these students. The USDOE and Congress responded with the Hurricane Education Assistance Act (HERA). This Act included federal funding through the federal Emergency Impact Aid Program, which was established to offset the cost of educating displaced students after the storms. Louisiana received a total of \$148,641,500 in Emergency Impact Aid funds. This was the first funding released after the storms and required that students be identified and accounted for by receiving entities, who would then request federal funding from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) as the fiscal agent for the program. Both public and nonpublic schools took in these displaced students, and both were eligible for funding.

Additionally, HERA provided for aid to restart schools in severely impacted communities. The Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations provided \$340 million of funding to Louisiana schools for the purchase of equipment, supplies, books and other contract services necessary to re-open schools.

At the time, there was no mechanism in place to support these kinds of recovery programs for either receiving districts and states or severely impacted communities. In fact, all HERA funds have been utilized and therefore, there is no permanent source of funding in place should such a disaster occur again. State, districts, schools and even more importantly, students and their

families, need to know there is a permanent and instantaneous funding source in place if their lives are disrupted by tragedy.

Moving forward and lessons learned

Through the devastation of these two storms and their tumultuous aftermaths, Louisiana, particularly the Department of Education, has identified necessary supports and systems that should be in place in the event of a crisis.

First, we require individual districts and schools to develop their own crisis management plans.

And student and teacher data systems across the region should be maintained electronically to ensure that the information systems are compatible, eliminate the risk of paper files being lost or damaged and permit information-sharing between schools and states. It would be extremely beneficial to implement statewide data systems, not only for Louisiana students, but students in Texas, Alabama, Mississippi and others who may be impacted by natural disasters. We want to be able to have the ability to provide up-to-date student data instantaneously. These systems would greatly assist education officials when deciding student placement and delivering appropriate educational services during severe times of crisis and displacement.

Perhaps most importantly, we would like to see a permanent fund established that parallels HERA. The Impact Aid and Restart programs process were extremely beneficial to our recovery efforts. If a permanent fund were to be established, it would accelerate financial support to receiving districts and states and would provide instantaneous funding to help educators support displaced students who are in great need of high quality services.

The State of Louisiana and other states along the Gulf have undergone tremendous challenges over the past few years in their efforts to recover from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We are fortunate for the generosity of the American people and even people throughout the world, as well as for the support of leadership advocates such as Senator Landrieu and others who have consistently voiced the needs of our children in committees such as this. Please allow me to convey our gratitude to you all, and rest assured that our aim is to leverage the resources and aid you have extended to us to transform Louisiana's education programs. While, our student enrollment has not returned to pre-storm levels—of the nearly 200,000 students that were displaced in 2005-06, about 143,000 have returned to our state. But we are coming back, and we are coming back strong – but not ignoring our charge to better prepare our state and our region for future disasters.

I appreciate the willingness of this Committee to hear some of our concerns around the needs of children impacted by these unfortunate events. It has been an honor and privilege to speak with you today, and I thank you for your time.