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Student Displacement in Louisiana After the Hurricanes of 2005

Experiences of Public Schools and
Their Students

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The research described in this report results from the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated research. Support for such research is provided, in part, by donors and by the independent research development provisions of RAND's contracts for the operation of its U.S. Department of Defense federally funded research and development centers. This research was conducted within RAND Education and the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute (RGSPI).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Student displacement in Louisiana after the hurricanes of 2005 : experiences of public schools and their students /
John F. Pane ... [et al].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4119-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Education—Demographic aspects—Louisiana. 2. Internally displaced persons—Education—Louisiana.
3. Disaster victims—Education—Louisiana. 4. Public schools—Louisiana. I. Pane, John F.

LC69.5.L68S88 2006

371.809763'021—dc22

2006037140

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Published 2006 by the RAND Corporation

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SUMMARY

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused the largest displacement of students in U.S. history. In Louisiana alone, the hurricanes displaced nearly 200,000 public school students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, more than 26 percent of the pre-storm enrollment. The purpose of this technical report is to provide timely documentation of many of the short-term effects of the movements of students that resulted from the displacement. Such information will help guide educators and policymakers in their ongoing responses to this disaster and in their planning to prepare for future events. Focusing on the Louisiana public school system, it explores the experiences of the displaced students and the effects of their movements on the state's public education system during the first academic year following the hurricanes; however, it does not address infrastructure issues related to storm damage, rebuilding, or cleanup.

This report documents patterns of student movement across the state in terms of the number of moves, durations of enrollments at each site, time out of school, and the numbers of students fitting each pattern. It also reports on the effects of the displacement on schools and their students and on policies adopted in response to serving displaced students.

Using Louisiana's student data system, the Student Information System (SIS), we obtained information about all students in the state who entered or exited a public school at any time during the 2005–06 school year as a result of the hurricanes. This information included the dates of entry and exit from schools, demographic information, and prior-year test scores. We also surveyed principals from a stratified sample of schools serving displaced students statewide. The survey included questions about the behaviors of displaced students, steps taken to address the needs of those students, and the effects of the influx of students on school resources, staff, and programs.

STUDENT MOVEMENT

In this report, the category *displaced students* is defined as those students who entered or exited Louisiana public schools as a result of the hurricanes. A subset of the displaced students is defined as *relocated students* while enrolled in Louisiana public schools other than their original schools. Administrative records from public schools in the state contain information on more than 196,000 students who were displaced. Over 81 percent of the displaced students came from three parishes (counties): Orleans, Jefferson,

and Calcasieu; five additional parishes account for nearly all of the remaining displaced students: St. Tammany, St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Vermilion, and Cameron. Displaced students enrolled in other schools in every parish in Louisiana and in 48 other states.

The school-enrollment patterns of these displaced students were complex and changed throughout the 2005–06 school year, as shown in Figure S.1. For each day from August 26, 2005,¹ until the end of the school year, the figure shows the percentages of displaced students who were in their original schools (medium gray at the bottom), relocated within their original parishes but not in their original schools (dark gray), relocated to Louisiana public schools outside their original parishes (very light gray), and not in Louisiana public schools (light gray at the top).

As shown in the figure, displaced students left the public school system when the two hurricanes forced them to evacuate or forced their schools to close. Students displaced by Katrina immediately began to reenroll in schools outside their original parish, and the number of these relocated students grew over the next few weeks until Rita struck in late September, causing a second wave of students to be displaced. In early October, a large group of students returned to their original schools when Jefferson Parish schools reopened, and another large group returned to their original schools when Calcasieu Parish schools reopened in late October. However, at that time, a substantial number of students remained relocated or out of the Louisiana public school system.

From November forward, there was a slow but steady increase in the proportions of students returning to their original schools or to other schools in their original parishes; many of the latter were returning to Jefferson and Orleans Parishes. Otherwise, the proportions of students in each of the four categories were generally stable, with the largest portion consisting of students who had returned to their original schools and the second-largest portion consisting of students who were not enrolled in any Louisiana public school. This latter group included students who enrolled out of state or in Louisiana private schools, as well as students who were not enrolled in any school. No existing data source enables the tracking of these students, making it impossible to determine exactly how many students did not reenroll.

¹ August 25, 2005 was the last school day before students began to exit schools because of the hurricane.

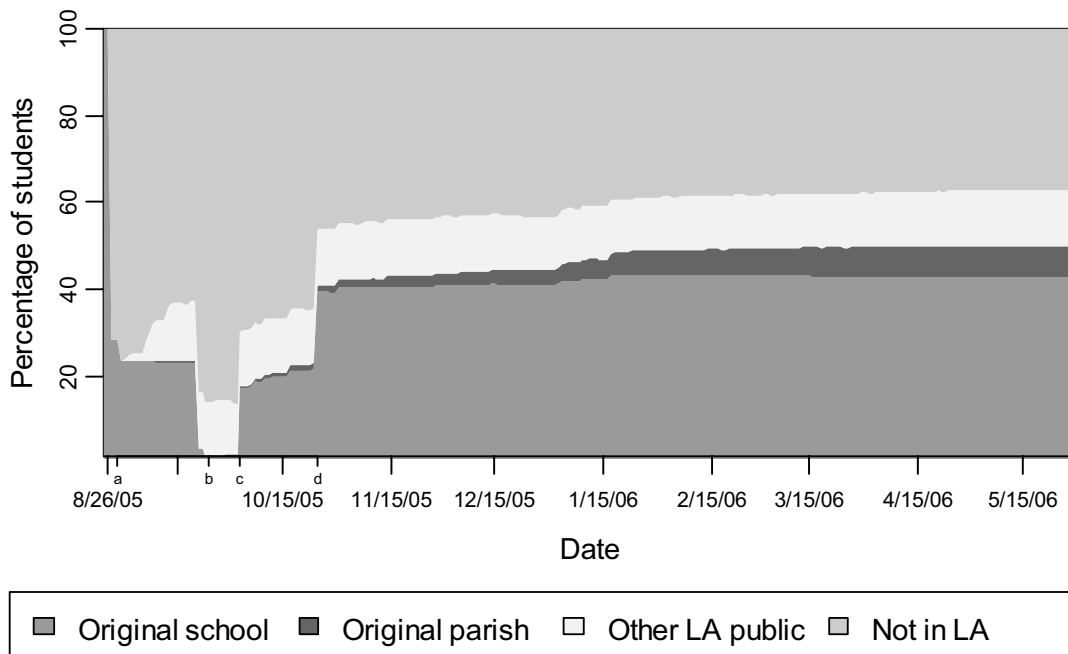


Figure S.1. Evolution of the Locations of Displaced Students.

For all displaced students who were enrolled on August 25, 2005, before the hurricanes, the figure shows the daily proportions of students in each of four categories throughout the 2005–06 school year. The medium-gray area at the bottom of the figure represents the proportion of students in their original schools. The dark-gray area above this represents the proportion of students in their original parishes but not in their original schools. The very light-gray area represents students enrolled in Louisiana public schools outside their original parishes, and the light-gray area at the top represents students not enrolled in any Louisiana public school. Point *a* denotes the date Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Point *b* denotes the date Hurricane Rita made landfall. Point *c* is the date that Jefferson Parish schools reopened, and Point *d* is the date that Calcasieu Parish schools reopened.

The relative stability in the proportions displayed in the figure masks a continued movement of students. For example, after their initial reenrollment, many displaced students continued to change schools and a substantial number left the public education system entirely. At the end of the school year, 10,000 students who had reenrolled at some time after the hurricanes were no longer enrolled in Louisiana public schools.

As suggested by this figure, many students missed a substantial amount of schooling following the storms. Among students who returned to Louisiana public schools, the median amount of time out of school until the first reenrollment was five weeks. Twenty-five percent missed less than three weeks of school, and 20 percent missed more than seven weeks. Additional school transfers after the first reenrollment often caused students to lose additional school time.

To summarize the experiences of individual displaced students, we classified students into four groups according to their yearlong enrollment patterns. Thirty-eight percent of displaced students were out of their original schools temporarily and then returned to the same school without enrolling in any other Louisiana public school. Another 31 percent relocated, including 7 percent who returned to their original schools after temporary relocation and 24 percent who did not return to their original schools for the duration of the 2005–06 school year. Finally, more than 31 percent of displaced students, including the majority of Orleans Parish students, did not enroll in any Louisiana public school for the remainder of the school year, either relocating to other states or to Louisiana private schools or not enrolling in any school.

Nearly 65 percent of the displaced students were members of racial/ethnic minority groups, compared to 59 percent in the overall enrollment of the eight parishes listed above and 52 percent statewide. Blacks were the largest minority group, at 58 percent in the displaced-student population, 53 percent in the eight parishes, and 48 percent statewide. The group of students who did not enroll in any Louisiana public school for the remainder of the school year included a disproportionately large percentage of black students and students who were achieving poorly before the hurricanes—characteristics of risk for academic failure.

SURVEY RESULTS

The goals of the survey of principals were to provide greater detail than would be available in administrative data on the experiences of schools following the hurricanes and to determine schools' responses to challenges presented by enrolling displaced students. It inquired about topics such as the number of displaced students enrolled; how displaced students compared with the school's preexisting students on demographic characteristics and achievement; the experiences of the displaced students in terms of attendance, social adjustment, and disciplinary incidents; effects on resources, activities, and the hiring and training of staff; and the effects on services provided by the school.

To analyze survey responses, we divided schools into two groups—high-PEDS (percentage of enrollment by displaced students) and low-PEDS schools—which together make up 99.7 percent of Louisiana public schools serving at least one displaced student. The average total enrollment in both high-PEDS and low-PEDS schools was approximately 510 students in January 2006, four months after the hurricanes. Displaced students, including those who were enrolled pre-hurricane and who returned afterward, accounted for at least 84 percent of enrollment in the high-PEDS schools. These schools

tended to be schools that closed for some period because they were directly affected by the hurricanes and later reopened. They accounted for 77 percent of displaced students in our dataset who were enrolled and 45 percent of relocated students. However, because many of the original students from these schools relocated to other areas, high-PEDS schools experienced enrollment declines from the prior year averaging 10 percent. High-PEDS schools were concentrated in a few parishes: 46 percent in Jefferson, 33 percent in Calcasieu, and 6 percent in Orleans. In low-PEDS schools, displaced students accounted for less than 36 percent of enrollment. These schools were more likely to be outside of the areas directly affected by the hurricanes, with the displaced students relocating from other schools and joining more-stable populations of preexisting students who were not displaced. Low-PEDS schools experienced an average enrollment increase of 4 percent.

A goal of the survey was to be able to understand how the enrollment of relocated students affected school operations and to compare relocated students with the preexisting student populations in schools. Principals were asked to respond to the survey to the best of their knowledge, referring to sources such as attendance records only if they were readily at hand. We instructed principals that we did not intend to burden them with data gathering, and that approximations were acceptable.

Behavior and Mental Health

The survey asked principals to report on attendance and other behaviors, disciplinary issues, and mental health needs of displaced students compared with those of preexisting students. Most principals reported that displaced students attended school regularly, often more consistently than did preexisting students in the schools. However, a substantial proportion of schools reported that, among at least some of their displaced students, there were high levels of absenteeism. Principals most frequently endorsed such explanations for absenteeism as expectations to return home soon, trips home to check the condition of property, relocation to another school district, family fragmentation, parental problems such as those related to employment, and transportation problems.

Overall, the majority of principals reported that the social behaviors of displaced students were similar to those of preexisting students in the schools. However, when principals did report differences, displaced students were judged more likely than preexisting students to engage in negative behaviors, such as fighting, violating school rules, arguing, bullying, playing in isolation, or eating in isolation; they were also judged less likely to engage in positive behaviors, such as participating in before or after school clubs or activities, school-sponsored social events outside the school day, or sports teams.

Principals also frequently reported that displaced students were more likely than preexisting students to need mental health counseling.

Many principals, particularly in high-PEDS schools, reported increases in the rates of disciplinary problems, including student tardiness, fights, verbal abuse of teachers, bullying, cutting class, and theft. However, for each of these disciplinary problems, fewer principals reported increases in the frequency or severity of these problems than did those who reported that there was no change.

Steps Taken to Meet the Needs of Displaced Students

Schools took a variety of actions to respond to the needs of displaced students, including increasing delivery of mental health counseling and tutoring, and undertaking efforts to improve attendance. Businesses and volunteers also contributed by providing funding, services, or supplies to help the schools. With the increased demand for services came a need to expand staffing; however, most schools were not able to hire more staff, and lack of resources or funding was often cited as the reason.

Although school-admissions policies, such as residency requirements, were adjusted to be more lenient, every principal was faced with the challenge of determining the best grade, classroom, and course placements for displaced students. Principals sought a variety of data to help in the transitioning and placement of students. Ranked as most essential were documentation of special education needs, current grade-level placement, and prior-year grades and test scores; however, the availability of this information was generally reported to be quite low. Principals infrequently cited previous school districts or the state as the sources of this information; instead, they primarily relied on parents and guardians or the students themselves to provide this information.

Finally, some principals noted that the pressures of policies related to state testing and accountability added to the hurricane-induced stresses in their schools.

Effects on Staff and Resources

Enrolling displaced students strained school resources in a variety of ways. Class sizes increased in more than a third of the schools, and more than half of schools needed additional classroom teachers and other types of staff, such as substitutes, special education or resource teachers, teachers' aides, support staff, and counselors or social workers. The need for teachers and other staff was greater in high-PEDS schools, and these schools also reported that the pool of applicants was smaller than in prior years. Principals frequently reported that these staffing needs went unmet, due primarily to a

lack of funding but also, in some cases, to the lack of qualified applicants. Among schools that did hire additional staff, it sometimes took considerable time to fill the positions. However, hiring standards were apparently not compromised: The new hires were reported to be similar to preexisting teachers in their qualifications. The school district was the most common source of funding for additional hires. Principals also reported that rapidly fluctuating enrollment numbers complicated their analysis of staffing needs and, ultimately, the decisions to hire.

In many schools, principals reported that teachers showed higher levels of stress than in prior years. Principals reported increased frequencies of work fatigue, job frustration, and absenteeism among teachers, particularly in high-PEDS schools. Principals noted that teachers hired to fill vacant positions were often displaced teachers who were struggling with their own personal problems resulting from the hurricanes.

The needs for additional resources went beyond staff, to include books and supplies, furniture, transportation resources, and classroom space. In many schools, these needs were met, sometimes by donations from outside sources; however, in a substantial number of schools, the resource needs persisted throughout the school year.

Recovery efforts and the strain of serving displaced students had a notable effect on teachers' professional development, particularly in high-PEDS schools. Principals reported that issues related to displacement created new needs for professional development; yet, they found it more difficult than in the past to provide release time for teachers to attend. Similarly, principals reported that issues related to displacement diverted their attention from other activities and issues in their schools and caused them to postpone activities that already had been planned.

IMPLICATIONS

The report draws the following implications from these results for the ongoing student-displacement phenomenon and preparedness for future displacements of large magnitude. The student displacement due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita persisted throughout the entire 2005–06 school year, and it will likely continue. Over the coming years, it likely will be necessary to continue helping these students recover and to prevent further damage that could result from untreated mental health problems or continued loss of schooling. Schools throughout the state and the nation will continue to be called on to serve these students, and it is imperative that they obtain the resources that they need to do so and to do it well. In addition, policies and resources to help teachers manage their own hurricane-related problems and mental health needs might ultimately improve the

services that teachers provide to students. Finally, education officials at both the state and local levels would benefit from better access to complete and accurate student records and from a national system to coordinate the two-way sharing of student information across state boundaries.