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President Bush Discusses Rebuilding Efforts in New Orleans

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology
New Orleans, Louisiana

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9:40 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: Madam Principal, thank you for having us. Laura and I are honored to be here. During the moment of reflection, it is a time to ask for the Almighty's blessings on those who suffered, those who lost a loved one, and remember that there's always a more blessed day in the future. And that's what we're here to celebrate, a more blessed day. And there's no better place to do so than in a place of hope, and that's the school. And so we're honored that you would welcome us. We love being with your teachers and your students. Thanks for being here.

Governor, thanks for coming. Governor Kathleen Blanco is an educational reformer. She has done what leaders are supposed to do -- when she sees a problem, address them head on, and pass law and budget necessary to achieve educational excellence. And you've done so, Governor. I congratulate you for your leadership.

I'm proud to be with the Congressman. Jeff, [sic] thanks for coming. You care deeply about the students of this district, and we're glad you're here.

I do want to thank Don Powell for joining us. Don is the recovery man who represents the White House and the administration here in Washington -- from - in Louisiana from Washington. And I thank you for your service.

I appreciate the state education Superintendent Pastorek. Superintendent, thanks for coming. He's got a vision of excellence for the schools in New Orleans and for Louisiana. He shared that vision with us earlier.

I appreciate Paul Vallas, Superintendent here in New Orleans, for his willingness to take on this challenge. He doesn't view it as a problem, he views it as an opportunity. I first met Paul in Chicago, where he was an advocate then like he is today of high expectations and strong accountability to make sure every child learns.

I appreciate Hilda Young, Sister Finnerty -- she's the Superintendent of the Catholic School System here. I thank all the teachers, students and parents who've joined us.

Hurricane Katrina broke through the levees, it broke a lot of hearts, it destroyed buildings, but it didn't affect the spirit of a lot of citizens in this community. This spirit can be best reflected when you think about a principal who refused to allow a school to be destroyed by the flood, and worked hard to not only rebuild the building, but keep the spirit alive. Or it can be reflected in the fact that teachers commute. We met a 7th grade teacher today who commutes 30 miles every day to be able to impart knowledge and to share wisdom with students who will be leading New Orleans in the future.

And so it's -- my attitude is this: New Orleans, better days are ahead. It's sometimes hard for people to see progress when you live in a community all the time. Laura and I get to come -- we don't live here, we come on occasion. And it's easy to think about what it was like when we first came here after the hurricane, and what it's like today. And this town is coming back. This town is better today than it was yesterday, and it's going to be better tomorrow than it was today. And there's no better place to find that out than in the school system.

First, I do want to thank our fellow citizens for their generosity when it comes to helping New Orleans and the Gulf Coast rebuild. The citizens of this country thus far have paid out \$114 billion in tax revenues -- their money -- to help the folks down here. And I appreciate the Governor. Last night we went to -- we had a nice dinner here in New Orleans -- by the way, have yet to recover. (Laughter.) Dooky Chase's. If you want to eat a lot of good food, go there. But during that dinner, the Governor expressed her appreciation to the taxpayers of America. In other words, the taxpayers and people from all around the country have got to understand the people of this part of the world really do appreciate the fact that the American citizens are supportive of the recovery effort.

Of the \$114 billion spent so far -- and resources allocated so far, about 80 percent of the funds have been disbursed or available. And, of course, Don and I will try to work through the bureaucracy in Washington, just like folks down here are trying to work through the bureaucracy to make sure that there are adequate plans for the money. And so we're working through this kind of collaborative effort of federal, state and local folks working together to make sure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely on priorities.

But there's been a commitment, and a strong commitment. A lot of people down here probably wondered whether or not those of us in the federal government not from Louisiana would pay attention to Louisiana or Mississippi. In other words, it's one thing to come and give a speech in Jackson Square; it's another thing to keep paying attention to whether or not progress is being made. And I hope people understand we do, we're still paying attention. We understand.

One of Don Powell's jobs is to make sure that the federal government understands the hurdles that remain for recovery. One hurdle was the levee system. We fully understand that New Orleans can't be rebuilt until there's confidence in the levees. It's one thing to plan; it's another thing to convince people that the levees will work. And there's been a lot of effort by the Army Corps of Engineers. As a matter of fact, Don Powell announced the other day that we're going to complete work to complete storm and flood protection infrastructure to a hundred-year protection level by 2011. And that's a commitment, and it's an important commitment to make.

We're also going to fund a \$1.3 billion network of interior drainage projects to ensure the area has better hurricane protection. In other words, there's federal responsibilities; the levee system is the federal responsibility, and we'll meet our responsibility. And obviously we want to work together with the state and local governments, as well. Obviously it's a collaborative effort.

One of the things that Kathleen and I have been working on a long time is wetlands restoration in order to provide more protection for the folks down here. We got a good bill out of the Congress and there's an opportunity now for Louisiana to have the cash funds necessary to begin a serious and substantive wetlands restoration program.

I appreciate the fact that Al Gonzales was down yesterday, talking about how the federal government can help on local law enforcement matters. I firmly

believe local law enforcement is just that -- local. It requires a commitment by the local folks to hold people to account for crime. But the federal government can help. And so Al was down yesterday, announcing and opening a family justice center to help the victims of domestic violence. The VA is going to build a medical center in downtown New Orleans as part of the federal commitment to helping people here recover.

And so I come telling the folks in this part of the world that we still understand there's problems and we're still engaged. And Don will continue to make sure that we listen and respond when possible.

But let me talk about the school system. There is nothing more hopeful than a good school system. And I firmly believe that excellence in education is going to be the leading edge of change for New Orleans. Margaret Spellings, who is the Secretary of Education, understands this concept. The government has provided Louisiana with more than \$700 million in emergency education funds to help not only the public school system, but also the parochial school system. And that's money well spent. It's money spent on construction, it's money spent on creating incentives for teachers to return, it's money spent to make sure children who went to other school districts -- those school districts got reimbursed. It was good money spent, because education needs to be the number-one priority of the state, just like Kathleen Blanco has made that the priority.

New Orleans is about to open 80 schools -- nearly 80 schools this fall. That's a remarkable achievement -- nearly half of which happen to be charter schools. I believe in freedom to manage and accountability to make sure everybody learns. And that's the essence of the charter school movement: freedom to manage, but accountability to make sure no child gets left behind.

And that's the spirit of the Superintendent -- both Superintendents here. They believe in high expectations and measuring. It's what I call challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations. If you don't believe that somebody can learn you'll set low expectations. If you believe every child can learn you'll raise the expectations and then you'll insist upon measurement to make sure that each child is tracked, that we disaggregate results. That's a fancy word for making sure that we understand whether or not each school is meeting certain standards, and then help for those that aren't, changes for those that aren't, and praise for those that are. And we're at MLK and we're here to heap praise. (Applause.)

This is the first public school to open in the Lower Ninth Ward. It is a tribute to volunteers, concerned parents and citizens who care about education. It is a tribute to the fact that there's teachers who taught in makeshift classrooms during renovations -- in other words, they care about the buildings, but they care more about education and were willing to teach no matter what the circumstances may be. And it's a tribute to a principal who had a clear vision. (Applause.) So we're here to herald excellence and to thank the good folks in this community for supporting this school, with the understanding that this school is one of the great beacons for hope.

I want to thank the educational entrepreneurs who've joined us, those who are in the process of helping find new teachers. Teachers -- there was a great concern, obviously, when the schools were reopening, whether or not there would be enough teachers. And people responded. People responded to the call to help provide at a grassroots level the support necessary to encourage people to teach. Teach NOLA is such an example. If you're interested in being a teacher from around the country, get on the Internet on Teach NOLA and you'll find opportunities to come here to New Orleans to teach.

We've got somebody from Washington who came down to help rally support for the school system. Teach For America is active in this community. The charter school system, by the way, spawns all kinds of different opportunities for people to be involved with schools. I think of KIPP McDonogh 15 School. It's a high standard school. It is a school that says, if there are rules that prevent us from teaching we'll try to figure out how to get around them, because what matters more than anything is teaching the child.

I was impressed that when they got in the school system, when they first got going in this particular school, they extended the school day with class every other Saturday. They said, what does it take to catch up? What do we need to do to meet standards? And the principal -- the former principal put it this

way: "It took a hurricane to speed up and really jump-start the reform efforts in New Orleans." In other words, the hurricane was disastrous for many reasons, but it also gave a great opportunity for a new way forward, seized by the Governor and the Superintendents and the principals, by the way.

Laura and I care a lot about the libraries. That's why we're dedicating books. We're proud to be a part of the rebuilding of this library. Laura has got a foundation and has established the Gulf Coast Library Recovery Initiative, all aiming to make sure that these libraries are stocked with books. You ought to apply to her foundation, by the way. (Laughter and applause.) I think you'll have a good opportunity. I'll try to work it for you. (Laughter.)

I'll never forget, one time when I was governor of Texas, a woman looked at me and she said, "Reading is the new civil right." It had a profound impact on the policies that we have pursued since I've been in public office, and Laura has pursued as a lifelong reader. And that person was right. We've got to start making sure those youngsters can read at grade level and stay reading at grade level. No better way to send the message that that is a commitment, by making sure the libraries are stocked.

I want to share a story with you about a woman named Rebecca Jeanfreau, who's here. Where are you, Rebecca? There you go, thanks for coming. She was a Boston architect. She studied to become an architect and was in a firm. But she is from New Orleans. And she started thinking about the community she loved. And so she said, "I need to act and I'm ready to act." And she came back to be a teacher. She left a promising career as an architect to come back to a community that is dear to her heart.

It's that spirit, by the way, that is going to allow me to predict with certainty New Orleans' better days are ahead for the New Orleans people. I mean, this is -- and there are stories like Rebecca all over this community, people who have heard a call to come back and help. No better way to help, by the way, than to teach.

But there are all kinds of different ways people can help the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast recover. You can contribute to the NGOs or the local organizations that are still helping heal hearts. You can help with sending books to schools. You can get on websites to determine where the needs are. If you're a citizen of this country who cares about making sure this part of the region fully recovers, please participate. Please find a way to help and continue to do so.

So, Governor, I'm honored you're here. Laura and I are thrilled to be in this school. We're really pleased that MLK School has given us an opportunity to herald excellence. We care deeply about the folks in this part of the world. We ask for God's blessings on the families who still hurt and suffer. And we thank God for the recovery efforts that thus far have taken place.

Thank you for your time. (Applause.)

END 9:55 A.M. CDT

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