

Agents of change

by **Stephen Maloney**

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The educational landscape in New Orleans has changed dramatically since Hurricane Katrina, but a new wave of leadership is pledging to revolutionize public schools in the city.

More than 100 new teachers and principals are preparing to enter Orleans Parish public schools in August, bringing with them years of experience and transforming the way students learn.

Veteran educator Sean Gallagher spent 13 years teaching in his native Philadelphia before deciding last year to come to New Orleans. To make sure he was prepared, he signed up with New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit attempting to place every school in the city on a level educational playing field.

Gallagher has spent the past 18 months touring the nation to get a firsthand look at successful charter school programs and training intensively for his new post as leader of Akili Academy, which will open for the first time in August.

"The core of the program is that they take us to 35 or 40 of the very best high-performing charter schools in the country," Gallagher said. "So we actually see people exhibiting best practices in schools that are actually closing the achievement gap."

New Schools founder and president Sarah Newell Usdin said giving future school leaders that kind of positive exposure will lead to a natural mixture of outside and homegrown education philosophies.

In addition to the classroom experience of Gallagher and five other future school leaders in training with New Schools, new ideas could find their way into local classrooms as veteran New Orleans educators and newcomers to the city integrate their philosophies.

"We have graduated six people from our program, and those people will be principals and assistant principals in schools across the city," Usdin said. "Some of those folks are local and some are from outside, which is kind of nice. There's this blend where you get to have both viewpoints represented to have a true diversity, and it builds strength in those different schools."

In addition to Akili Academy, New Schools has played an integral part in developing five other new charter schools: Miller McCoy Academy, New Orleans College Prep, Sci Academy, Sojourner Truth Academy and the Langston Hughes Lower School.

Hughes, which taught fourth and fifth grades last school year, will expand to include kindergarten through eighth grade. Akili will have kindergarten and first-grade classes, Miller McCoy will feature grades six through nine, New Orleans College Prep will feature grades six and seven and Sci Academy and Sojourner Truth are each beginning with a ninth-grade class.

With the exception of Hughes, which will be at capacity, all of the schools will add one grade level per year until they serve grades K-8 or 8-12.

Usdin said the diversity of charter school leaders will ultimately close the achievement gap between poor and more affluent students.

New Schools affiliate TeachNOLA is also helping redesign the city's educational system by training new and experienced teachers. By creating classroom environments that mirror real-world situations, TeachNOLA site manager Ana Menezes said the program prepares teachers to excel on day one.

"All the research has shown that having a highly effective teacher or school leader in charge of the students is more important than books, technology, classrooms and all of those things," Menezes said. "Our mission is to ensure that the teachers we train make significant gains with their students from day one. These are folks that are extremely committed and have deep content knowledge and are ready to get to work."

With 63 people enrolled in the TeachNOLA fellows program, designed for uncertified teachers, and 58 certified teachers, Menezes said program graduates will be spread through new and existing schools to help as many students as possible.

Micah Putman, a TeachNOLA fellow from Jonesborough, Ark., has spent this summer learning new methods of teaching early education, which she said will prove invaluable when she begins teaching at Crocker Arts and Technology Academy in the fall.

"I switched from studying journalism to get my masters in education because I wanted to do something fulfilling and I wanted to be a part of the rebuilding of New Orleans," Putman said. "This program is preparing me to do exactly that."

Usdin said the city's new charter schools have shifted the focus from school systems to individual schools, allowing highly effective teachers to make the maximum impact.

"What is amazing is that throughout the city there is very much a changing mindset given the intense focus on autonomy and accountability that is true on all school levels," Usdin said. "We really have empowered educators to make the tough choices — do what they need to do for children — and I think educators feel that, which is why we're able to attract new leaders to the city."•