

## Opening a School Draws on All of Founders' Skills

'To-Do' List Includes Marketing, Hiring, Facilities

By **Lesli A. Maxwell**

*New Orleans*

Tiffany Hardrick and Keith Sanders arrive in front of a tidy, rebuilt brick home on a mostly deserted block where the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina left every house in some state of ruin.

The founders of a new charter school for boys in New Orleans East are here on a humid spring afternoon to see Jordan Robinson, a 5th grader, and his family. Jordan, who has been attending a school taken over by the state of Louisiana after the storm, will be among the inaugural class of 6th graders at their school, the Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business.

Hardrick and Sanders, the co-principals, have come to talk with Jordan and his grandmother about expectations for Miller-McCoy students.

There will be homework every night, they tell Jordan, who listens quietly. Students must wear a prep-schoolstyle uniform featuring khaki pants, a tie, and a dark blazer bearing the school's crest.

"You're a Miller-McCoy man now," Sanders tells Jordan. "You represent our school everywhere you go."

And, if he keeps a grade point average of at least 2.5, the principals say, Jordan can play any of four sports—football, track, basketball, and baseball.

Each of them signs the Miller-McCoy "covenant," a document outlining the responsibilities of the student, parents or guardians, and the principal. Jordan's teacher will also sign the covenant.

Then the principals make a bold pledge to Jordan and his

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grandmother.

"If you stick with us all the way through, we will get you to college," Hardrick says. "And at the end of the day, if we don't get you to college, it's not your failure. It's ours."

In less than a year, Hardrick and Sanders—working at least 70 to 80 hours a week in a shared office, from their sparsely furnished apartments, and sometimes in their vehicles—went from writing a charter school proposal to sitting in the homes of their new students to guarantee them and their parents academic success. They share an intense sense of mission that research shows is common to charter school leaders.

The school, which opened Aug. 11, serves 108 boys in 6th grade and 140 boys in 9th grade. Hardrick oversees the middle school program, which will eventually expand to include the 7th and 8th grades; Sanders is in charge of the high school, which will grow to serve 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students.

"These types of school leaders really have a no-nonsense, bedrock belief that all children, regardless of income or background, can learn and achieve at higher levels than the rest of us in society tend to believe," observes Greg Richmond, the president and chief executive officer of the Chicago-based National Association of Charter School Authorizers. "Every kid coming into those schools quickly finds out that the leaders and the teachers really expect things from them and hold them to it, day after day after day."

Richmond, whose organization has been helping Louisiana vet and evaluate charter school proposals since the 2005 hurricane made charters a centerpiece of efforts to revive public education in New Orleans, emphasizes that such beliefs and characteristics are not unique to charter school leaders.

"It's not that people in charter schools are genetically better," he says, "it's just that the charter model allows them to do what they need to do for kids."

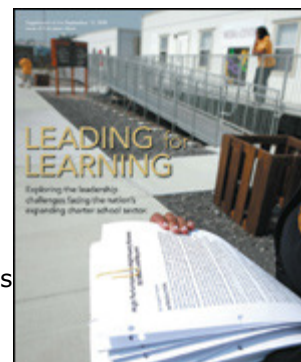
### **Hard to Resist**

A little more than a year ago, Hardrick and Sanders weren't even considering leaving their jobs as principals in Memphis, Tenn., where both were trained by the New Leaders for New Schools program. They'd had the same veteran principal as a mentor and were later chosen to lead two struggling middle schools in that city.

But during a May 2007 trip to New Orleans to help out with a principal-recruitment effort, they caught the eye of Matt Candler, who pitched them on the idea of leaving Memphis to start a new charter school here.

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“It started as a conversation over dinner, and it was just obvious to me that they are extremely passionate about the outcomes of where students’ lives can go if the conditions are right in schools,” says Candler, the chief executive officer of **New Schools for New Orleans**, a nonprofit that supports charter schools. “What struck me about them was that they had a rare combination of being data-driven and were fluent in how important using ‘data is in the culture of a school and the impact on student achievement.”



Students line up outside the modular building in East New Orleans, behind a school damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

—Lee Celano for Education Week

Hardrick and Sanders were interested. It was hard to resist the opportunity to create what they envision as an ideal school for poor and minority students. They also felt good about the shape their schools in Memphis were in and about their likely successors as principals, which made considering a move to New Orleans easier.

Two months later, they finished their detailed proposal for the school—right down to the name Miller-McCoy, inspired by Kelly Miller, a mathematician and Howard University professor who was the first African-American admitted to Johns Hopkins University, and Elijah McCoy, a prominent black inventor—and New Schools for New Orleans agreed to back them.

“What we did is put our passion on paper,” says Sanders, 36. “We understood that there was a need in New Orleans for more good schools, and we had both had success in raising student achievement in our schools in Memphis. We had an idea we really thought would work.”

The Miller-McCoy charter was approved last December by the Louisiana board of education. The two have hardly slowed down since, even as they’ve endured trying personal circumstances.

Hardrick, 32, is a divorced mother of two who had been a community college professor in Arkansas and a high school math teacher in Memphis before becoming a principal through the New Leaders program. For nearly a year, while she and Sanders planned Miller-McCoy, she drove 800 miles round trip most weekends to visit her two young children, who stayed in Memphis until she relocated them to New Orleans just last month.

Sanders, 36, did the same. His wife and child also remained in Memphis, and will move to New Orleans later this month after his second child is born.

### **Incubation Money**

With only nine months until Miller-McCoy would open in August, Hardrick and Sanders had to recruit local residents to serve on its governing board, hire roughly 20 teachers and other staff members, and secure a building for the school—no easy feat in a city still vexed by a shortage of inhabitable school buildings. By the end of March, they had lined up space in

modular buildings in New Orleans East, on the campus of a school badly damaged by Katrina.

There was also the matter of developing a curriculum that was aligned to the ACT college-entrance exam and incorporated what they consider to be the less rigorous Louisiana state standards. They also faced recruiting students in a highly competitive market.

As the leaders of a charter selected for “incubation” by New Schools for New Orleans, Hardrick and Sanders were each guaranteed \$10,000 a month for 13 months to cover their salaries, benefits, taxes, and incidentals. They also received a \$5,000 technology stipend that pays for the laptop computers and BlackBerrys that Hardrick and Sanders are never without. New Schools provided \$50,000 to help pay for training and professional development for the two principals and the nine school board members, who were selected with New Schools’ help. Hardrick and Sanders used some of that money to pay for visits to successful charter schools, including Noble Street College Prep in Chicago and North Star Academy in Newark, N.J., where they looked for ideas and practices to copy.



Hardrick and Sanders observe a class on Aug. 11, the opening day of school.  
—Lee Celano for Education Week

They set up an office at New Schools for New Orleans’ headquarters with other startup charter school leaders and hired their first employee—a staff member who moved from Memphis—to help manage marketing, budget, and enrollment duties.

A big challenge, they knew, would be attracting students. In a city awash in charter schools—roughly 60 percent of public school students attend one of the more than 40 charters that have proliferated since the hurricane—there’s a lot of competition. Miller-McCoy’s identity as a school for boys set it apart immediately, but also led to some initial confusion among New Orleans parents who had only known all-boys schools that were parochial or private and cost money.

“We had to add ‘free tuition’ to our marketing campaign so that parents wouldn’t assume that Miller-McCoy would be out of reach,” Hardrick says.

### **Staking Out Neutral Ground**

Breaking through the dense layers of charter school promotions wasn’t easy. Last spring, dozens of different charters had enrollment campaigns under way, with radio spots, advertisements on city buses, and signs cluttering New Orleans’ grassy medians, known locally as neutral ground.

On a sweaty April afternoon, Hardrick and Sanders drove across the Mississippi River bridge to set up signs in Algiers, part of New Orleans’ West Bank community. It was their first outreach in that part of the city, which suffered less storm damage and had become home for many returning residents. Scouring for empty or nearly empty pieces of neutral ground that

other charters hadn't targeted already, they staked some 50 signs within a half-hour. Then it was back over the bridge to start the evening's round of home visits with students and parents.

Their biggest marketing coup, Hardrick says, was the billboard they leased on Interstate 10 in downtown New Orleans, near the Superdome. The sign included their personal cellphone numbers, and as soon as the advertisement was up, "the calls started rolling in," Hardrick says. When they could gain access, the principals visited schools around the city to tell students about Miller-McCoy.

### **Collaborative, Not Timid**

Terrence A. Brown, a regional superintendent in Memphis who mentored Hardrick and Sanders, says the two leaders succeeded at their respective middle schools. Both oversaw significant increases in test scores in two to three years. At Lanier Middle School, Hardrick expanded the number of single-gender courses that had started when Brown was principal. She used data to show skeptical teachers that in a mathematics class of mixed-ability 7th grade girls, 100 percent passed the state math exam.

"They are both collaborative leaders, and neither of them is timid about holding people accountable," says Brown, who has advised them on the development of their curriculum and instructional models for Miller-McCoy.

Hardrick and Sanders also have drawn on their Memphis network to bring a half-dozen teachers and other staff members to Miller-McCoy. One of them will be Miller-McCoy's athletic director and dean of discipline.

Science teacher Detra Humble, another Memphis recruit, says she was willing to uproot so she could continue to work for Sanders, who had been her principal at Riverview Middle School. She arrived here in July and became immersed in planning lessons and writing interim assessments with the school's other science teachers.

"When Mr. Sanders first told me he was leaving, I was disappointed, but when he said he'd be starting a charter school in New Orleans, I told him right away I wanted to come too," Humble says. "I am still a new teacher, this will be my fourth year, and I still have a lot of optimism and idealism about what I can do in the classroom for kids. But I wanted to be sure I'd still have a boss that believes the same things and has the same passion."

Richmond of the national charter school authorizers' group says cultivating teachers like Humble is a hallmark of the best school leaders.

"They inspire teachers, and they can turn around the careers of teachers who have been frustrated or have been burned out," he says. "They also are capable of involving the broader community and bringing the outside world into their school."

But to the hard-charging Hardrick and Sanders, no



Hardrick talks with a group of teachers during

part of preparing for the opening of Miller-McCoy has been as important, or time-intensive, as the home visits with students and families. The same night they visited Jordan Robinson and his family, the two principals delivered their college pledge to three more boys and their families.

orientation on July 21, three weeks before the start of school. She was able bring a half-dozen teachers and other staff members from Memphis with her to New Orleans.

—Lee Celano for Education Week

And in the weeks that followed, nearly 200 other students and parents heard it as well. The promise of preparing their students for college is the central tenet to which Hardrick and Sanders adhere, although in a city where most public school students lagged academically before Katrina, and many missed school after the storm, delivering on that pledge won't be easy.

"To go and visit all of these kids in their homes and sit on their couches with their parents is the most important work we can do right now," Sanders says after leaving the Robinsons' home. "I think it has a powerful impact on all of us. It establishes accountability for everyone. If we didn't believe this was possible, we wouldn't be pledging what we are to parents."

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