

October 5, 2005

Dear Senator,

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, members of our churches pray not only for relief for families who are trying to rebuild their lives but also for wisdom and courage among the policy makers and leaders who are crafting plans for rebuilding the Gulf Coast communities. Among the very complicated responses to this disaster will be the rebuilding of the public schools across the region.

Our public education system in the United States is a great blessing. As those who continue to advocate that our public schools must do a much better job of serving children in poor and racially segregated communities, we also recognize that the United States continues to serve more students with higher quality public education than the vast majority of other societies. This massive public education infrastructure includes over 90,000 public schools in 15,000 school districts, and serves approximately 50 million children and adolescents every day. Rebuilding this system when it has been damaged across a multi-state region must be among the highest priorities of the hurricane recovery.

The magnitude and severity of the challenges posed to public education in the Gulf Coast by the hurricane's devastation include immediate logistics and long-range policy:

- Enrolling students who have been displaced in other districts temporarily or permanently. Building immediate capacity in the receiving school districts. Making children and their families feel welcome. Supporting health and psychological needs of displaced families.
- Locating and routing the records of these students to schools that may be serving the children temporarily.
- Keeping excellent educators, whose schools have been damaged, in the profession by finding ways to employ teachers while they are temporarily or permanently displaced.
- Replacing buildings that have been irreparably damaged. Replacing irreparably contaminated school buses.
- Getting financial disaster relief available to the districts that must rebuild.
- Funding public schools in the months and first years after the disaster. Because local and state funds make up 93 percent of school funding, it will be challenging to afford public infrastructure until local economies rebound.

We join with other faith groups who have sent this same letter. We urge the President and Congress to avoid politicizing hurricane relief by introducing programs like school vouchers and forms of privatization that would direct public funds away from the very public schools where the financial needs for recovery are so great. The first educational priority must be to rebuild the public education infrastructure that is the foundation of our democracy and our economy.

Sincerely,

Rev. Elenora Giddings Ivory
Director Washington Office

Presbyterian Church (USA)