

***The following article was written by Carolyn Chandler, former ISAS Board Officer, who retired in June as Head of Metairie Park Country Day. Though a while ago, Katrina memories are as fresh as yesterday for those who lived it. There are inspiring words in her perspective for surviving and thriving beyond Harvey.***

## **Katrina and Disruptive Innovation** (Article Date: August 12, 2013)

*On Monday, August 29, 2005, at the very beginning of a new school year, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in southeast Louisiana as a Category 3 hurricane. Katrina was one of the five deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Communities were overwhelmed with obstacles on the road to getting back to “normal” and independent schools in the area were no exception. Metairie Park Country Day School is located in Metairie, Louisiana, just outside of New Orleans. This is one school’s story of how the school’s board and leadership found innovation and a new life while wrestling with the post-Katrina challenges.*

Many forces can trigger school innovation, some from unlikely sources. Looking back over the last eight years since the “weather event” that attracted national interest in New Orleans, we realize that the catalyst for change in our particular school was the major disruption that Hurricane Katrina caused. We learned many lessons along the way as we have lived with and through our disruption – in retrospect, they were obvious lessons, but back then, all terrain seemed as new as it was uncertain.

### **Lead on**

When Katrina struck, I was the assistant head of Metairie Park Country Day School, having been appointed to the position in 2003. The aftermath of the disaster was surreal. All of us – trustees, faculty, staff, students and families – had stories to tell as we reconnected from around the country by phone, online, and in person. Early on, we realized it was helpful to tell and retell our stories to one another, at times laughing and at other times crying. While listening was crucial to our personal healing, we needed board leadership to move our school community past the drama and into action.

Once communication could be re-established, the board’s Executive Committee took charge while school leadership, staff, students, and families were scattered around the country. Their early and frequent telephone conferences led to changes in job assignments for the head and assistant head of school and to a controversial but essential policy about tuition retention. We also hired a turnaround management firm of national repute to analyze the numbers, model various operations scenarios, and help the board make the best financial decisions for the school’s survival. With limited knowledge about when life in Metairie and the surrounding New Orleans area could return to even a semblance of normal, all scenarios were on the table, including not opening for the rest of the year and variations on how many of our students might actually be able to return to New Orleans to attend school.

The board chair contributed encouragement, optimism, updates from other school communities, and old-fashioned determination. “Don’t worry about the money,” he told me, when I was, in fact, very worried about the money that it would take to restore our badly damaged campus. “Don’t cut corners; get everything repaired in the best possible way so the students can return to a beautiful place. Do it right, and go as fast as you can. If you see a roadblock, let’s talk about it, and we’ll deal with it. How soon can we re-open? The sooner, the better.” The board’s imperative to get the school back up and running at a time when the public schools had already announced they were closing for the year, the trust in the school leadership to make the necessary decisions, and this level of commitment to bringing the school back from the water damage and mold in every building was inspiring, and a bit daunting.

### **Lighten up**

The reality was that reconstruction was going to be expensive and the organization of it in a corner of the country where everyone was trying to re-build as quickly and well as possible was difficult at best. We had just completed an

emotional process, releasing from employment many loyal and beloved faculty members who very much wanted to stay, but the numbers dictated otherwise. These factors were laid out by me in a troubling report in an Executive Committee meeting. This meeting ended up being a game-changing one for me personally.

The Executive Committee again set the tone, this time through the board treasurer when he spoke up and said, "We are going to do this work together, we will make a success of it, AND we are going to have fun in the process. It's no good if we don't make it fun." Doing the right thing in focusing on bringing home our displaced students, trusting in the board to find the necessary resources, and lightening up were the unforgettable lessons of that day. We left the room with the understanding that we really would bring our school back from the financial and enrollment brink and that we would enjoy working together to do it. It was a time when grieving turned to remembering the joy that had always been part of our school community. It seemed like a culminating moment at which everyone was able to take a deep breath and realize that while this was clearly not a great time, digging into this project was a good, tangible thing that would make a significant difference in the lives of our school community.

### **Celebrate everything**

As the plan for restoring our physical plant unfolded, there was a need to get back to some level of "normal." We received ideas from different quarters. The lower school principal called from the East, where she and her husband were staying with their daughter because their home had been flooded. She asked: "Could we open just a small school in November? We'll meet upstairs and keep the kids out of the construction. It will only be about 70 students, and we have enough of our teachers here in town. I'll come back tomorrow if you say yes." Of course, the Executive Committee and school leadership agreed.

Not merely 70, but 170 students came back to "November School" with a newly designed curriculum we created to let them express themselves through art, to study stories of hope with history lessons centered on the renaissance of cities following destruction, and with learning groups formed of students of various ages mixed together to strengthen community. No one will forget the joyous feeling of that six-week session, the lead up to the opening of our full program on January 2, 2006, when nearly 75 percent of our 720 students returned.

An important lesson from November School: the faculty got to know colleagues from different divisions. They came together to create essential curriculum for students in disruptive times, watch one another teach, and work together with assigned faculty work crews around campus. This hard work created respect, deepened superficial relationships, and strengthened commitment. We were a team.

Today, we continue to have teachers in the three divisions come together as often as possible through small group workshops, study groups, peer observations, and committees. Knowing, enjoying, and respecting our fellow colleagues have made our community more vibrant.

We felt the same vibrancy in our parent community. When our need was the greatest, parents volunteered to work around campus by taking shifts in the kitchen, hacking out all the dead vegetation and replacing landscaping, working every day in the libraries to clean books we managed to save and then reorganizing everything. A father of graduates came forward to say that he and his wife realized they had never adequately thanked the faculty for all they had done for their children. They wondered how they could do more. The family subsequently donated money, and the school created a three-week summer study program in which faculty are paid to pursue topics they choose that will enrich the student experience.

### **Say yes**

In the years that followed, the experience of November School inspired more and more ideas from faculty and staff. Initially, they suggested initiatives that centered on restoring traditions that had been important to the school in the distant past. The chair of the physical education department wanted to revive the school's family Red and Blue tradition. Another question: Could we bring back woodworking? The teacher who once taught the craft offered his services. The principal of the middle school talked about an outdoor trip to North Carolina that had been scrapped years ago. Could we design a middle school outdoor program and improve this trip so it would be a fitting cap on the middle school experience of our eighth-graders? A math teacher volunteered to manage the trip. Our athletic trainer presented a detailed proposal to revamp our after-school program and offered to be in charge. A science teacher described a summer institute he ran at his former school, and wanted to start it here. Perhaps Tulane University could partner with us? Could we bring back Country Day Abroad? Foreign language teachers said they would be glad to plan and chaperone the trips. A lower school master teacher asked if she could switch to teaching a higher grade

level. "I need a new challenge," she said. That prompted us to consider other changes: Could we offer AP's to sophomores? A biochemistry course for freshmen? Senior externships? A new investigatory math program in lower school? Engage in social media? Revamp admission procedures? A fresh approach to the annual fund? Install Virtual LANS to expand the network? iPads for the middle school? The ideas have not stopped pouring in, nor has the action.

### **Keep going**

We like to believe it really was Winston Churchill who said, "If you're going through hell...keep going," but whoever said it certainly had a point. While "hell" somewhat overstates our situation, we knew it was best to keep going in the months after Katrina hit. The Technology Committee voted unanimously to continue with a slightly scaled down version of the 1:1 laptop program we had planned to launch. After football homecoming week was rained out, we held an elaborate basketball homecoming celebration in January 2006 after Katrina. We marched on though the annoyances of installing a unified database for all operations of the school that we had planned the year that the storm hit. The summer arts program that we considered abandoning instead forged ahead even with low attendance after our first year back. After much debate, we finally decided to add a Pre-K program, and began taking steps to design and implement one.

### **Come together**

Katrina had left us with a very challenging assignment---we had seasoned staff and teachers and devoted parents who had to tackle a savaged campus and 25 percent of our families had moved away. However, the board chair also realized the importance of bringing the entire board back together following a year of intense action by the Executive Committee. With great wisdom, he declared it was time for the Executive Committee to step back and let the board assume its proper role. The new 2006-2007 year was also my first year as head-of-school, an appointment I assumed on July 1, 2006. It was more important than ever for the board and the new head of school to learn best governance practices together. Our slimmed down budget had no line item for consultants, so we decided to ask a sitting head from a highly successful school to facilitate our retreat. His facilitation in best practices and communication was remarkably helpful. We all got on the same governance page; and in the post-Katrina years, we have continued to hold annual board retreats, all facilitated by a sitting head of school.

### **Budget wisely**

Nothing clarifies values more than the need to cut the budget. The board quickly realized that the faculty was the school's greatest treasure. Consequently, abolishing the school's traditionally high tuition remission benefit was never seriously discussed by the board. We began to cut back in other ways: our traditional white linen tablecloths in the dining room were replaced with paper for several months because linen service was too expensive. However, there was NO WAY we could scrap the similarly expensive traditional Krispy Kreme doughnut snack on Thursdays. The troops – adults and students alike – would have rebelled. When we weren't able to give raises to anyone in the first year after our "disruption," no one quit, basically because no one was surprised. We had openly shared author Jim Collins's "brutal facts" with everyone throughout the year.

### **Make friends**

During the past eight years, making friends has been paramount, especially since this novice head had so much to learn. We are fortunate to have so many resources for meeting school leaders from around the country, not only through NAIS and our regional accrediting agencies, but also through smaller groups such as NAPSG, now known as The Heads' Network. The Klingenstein Foundation also offers high quality programs with strong national participation. We have been privileged to be involved with their work. Volunteering and participating in these groups of experienced people stimulates fresh thinking – and is also a lot of fun.

At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, our first full year of being back in session, with our campus fully and finally restored, our students produced a stunning cover for the yearbook. There, on a watercolor of the school's iconic administration building are the words, "Country Day; New and Forever." Students, too, felt both the winds of change and the strength of our determination to emerge from our disruption stronger than ever to ensure that our school will last forever. Importantly, though much is new, much is still the same. Visiting alumni notice many trees missing from our large central courtyard; but they can also see that more sunlight now pours through the trees that remain, letting the grass grow even thicker, some say even greener.