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Katrina's Impact on Pre-K Programs Lingers; Delays in reconstruction, restaffing are hindering preschools, child care

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From *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*



A year after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, many **preschools, child-care centers**, and other early-childhood **programs** in the region **are** still struggling to reopen.









In Louisiana, 52 of the 266 **child-care** centers that were operating in Orleans Parish before Katrina have reopened, according to a report released last month by Save the Children, an international relief organization. About half the ones that remain closed **are** not expected to reopen, according to the study, which was conducted by the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University.

The study also showed that only about 10 of the 30 Head Start or Early Head Start **programs** in the New Orleans area **are** again serving children.

Programs **"are** coming back more slowly than we would have expected," said Judy Watts, the president of the Louisiana Association for the Education of Young Children, based in Baton Rouge.

While some grants from the state and from private foundations **are** available for materials and equipment, she said, there isn't enough money for every center. The lack of up-and-running **preschools** is affecting families who have returned to the area, Ms. Watts added.

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"Housing is the biggest barrier for people who want to come back, but **child care** is right behind that," she said.

In Mississippi, early-childhood-education centers have rebounded faster, largely because of a rebuilding initiative organized by the Early Childhood Institute at MSU.

Of the 291 licensed centers--including family **child-care** homes--that existed in the region hit by Katrina in late August of last year, 251 were back open just six months after the disaster.

Waiting for Contractors

In the New Orleans area, many private providers of early-childhood education and **care** say they want to reopen, but **are** unable to find contractors to repair their facilities.

Pearlie Harris, the director of Royal Castle **Child** Development Center in New Orleans, had hoped to have her center open at the beginning of August. But contractors haven't finished painting and haven't fixed the air conditioning in her facility.

"When you think they're coming, they're not coming, because everyone is tugging at them," Ms. Harris said.

While she's licensed for 100 children, she has registered only 20, because she hates to keep calling families to tell them she has to delay her opening date yet again.

Some preschool directors **are** also trying to restaff their facilities, but **are** struggling to find employees--much less those who already have training or experience in early-childhood education, Ms. Watts of the Louisiana Association for the Education of Young Children said.

"We could go in and train new staff, but we can't find the people," she said.

Ms. Harris said finding teachers and assistants hasn't been a problem because her 10-year-old program has a good reputation in the community. But she still worries that since she can't pay them yet, they might need to take positions elsewhere if her center doesn't open soon.

School-based prekindergarten **programs**--such as Louisiana's public **pre-K** program known as LA4--**are** somewhat better off because of the push to reopen schools for the new school year.

In New Orleans, of the 38 public elementary schools run by the state, the city school board, and authorized charter schools, 22 **are** offering prekindergarten during the 2006-07 school year, according to figures from the Louisiana Department of Education.

But schools won't really know how many children to expect until they show up, said Cheryl Michelet, a spokeswoman for the department.

"It's a guessing game," she said.

While school-based **programs** have more resources available to them than community-based centers do, some **are** still affected by the rising costs of construction materials and labor.

In Louisiana's 52,000-student Jefferson Parish school district, the opening of an early-childhood center at the Audubon Elementary School in Kenner has been delayed until the 2007-08 school year. Construction on the center had begun shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit, but the district postponed the project because of the escalating costs of building and the lack of available contractors.

Additional classroom space was available in the existing building, however, so **pre-K** students will still be served this fall.

Mississippi's Good News

In Mississippi, early-childhood **programs** benefited from the Rebuilding After Katrina project, which conducted immediate assessments of the damage and provided a vehicle for donations from large contributors such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, of Battle Creek, Mich., and the Chevron Corp., the San Ramon, Calif., oil conglomerate, which has a refinery in Pascagoula, Miss.

"Chevron knew they had to get **child-care** centers open in order to have workers," said Lynn Darling, the volunteer coordinator for Embrace Mississippi's Children, a statewide project that focused on helping **programs** replenish their supplies of books and other learning materials.

"The [rebuilding] plan had one goal--to help **child-care programs** in the disaster area reopen as rapidly as was safe," according to another report, released earlier this year by the Early Childhood Institute.

Licensed **programs** were given priority in the rebuilding effort, and donations were tied to participation in staff-development **programs**, as a way to encourage increases in quality over the long term, the report says.

In both New Orleans and in Mississippi, the institute has also recommended that assistance be targeted to **programs** that **are** already open or **are** close to reopening.

The New Orleans report also recommends that when planning for future disasters, officials should recognize "that **child care** is a critical service and its restoration should be included in national disaster plans."

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