

9/8/2005

By David J. Hoff

Education Week

La. Schools Chief Seeks \$2.8 Billion in K-12 Aid

Louisiana school districts decimated by Hurricane Katrina will need \$2.8 billion in federal aid this school year to recover from the devastating storm, Louisiana's top education official said Sept. 8, adding that as many as 100,000 of the public school students displaced in the New Orleans area may return to their home schools by January.

That would leave about 55,000 students from New Orleans and one of its neighboring parishes without a home school to return to during the current school year.

The \$2.8 billion in federal aid would provide districts with enough money to replace state and local revenue for schools lost in the aftermath of the hurricane that ravaged southeastern Louisiana, effectively erasing the tax base of the area for the short-term and crippling it for several years to come, Cecil J. Picard, the Louisiana superintendent of schools, said in a telephone interview Sept 8.

Mr. Picard said that he would be forwarding his \$2.8 billion request to federal officials in the next few days. Although Congress has approved \$10.5 billion in short-term disaster relief and President Bush has proposed another \$51.8 billion, both plans focus on the immediate needs of the area and wouldn't provide funds for schools.

The \$2.8 billion would allow many schools in the New Orleans area to reopen soon, some even in the city itself. Mr. Picard said eight or nine schools in the city's West Bank suffered little damage and may be able to accept about 13,600 students by January.

But at least 80 buildings in the 60,000-student Orleans Parish district were destroyed or suffered significant damage from the Aug. 29 winds and the floodwaters that followed. Students who attended those buildings are unlikely to attend school in the city in the current school year.

Schools Plan To Open Doors

Those estimates are based on an initial inspection conducted shortly after floodwaters spread across the city, Mr. Picard said. School officials will know more about the long-term damage caused by the storm once they conduct a follow-up inspection of the city next week.

Other New Orleans-area districts are working to reopen soon, Picard said.

The St. Charles Parish schools are aiming to open by Sept. 26. The 9,600-student district west of New Orleans saw little damage to its 19 schools.

The schools in 34,000-student St. Tammany Parish expect to open by the beginning of October. Forty-six of the district's 51 schools may be ready to accept students by Oct. 3. Students from the other five schools in the district would attend classes in other schools on a schedule that allows two schools to operate in the same building, but on separate shifts, Mr. Picard said.

The 51,650-student Jefferson Parish school district had five schools destroyed and 22 significantly damaged. The rest of the district's 84 schools had no damage or only minor damage, Mr. Picard said. School officials there are trying to start school again in October or November.

The 5,000-student Plaquemine Parish schools may be able to open by January, Mr. Picard added. Six of the district's nine schools suffered flood damage.

The 8,800-student St. Bernard district, however, is unlikely to reopen in the current school year, Mr. Picard said. The parish east of New Orleans is still flooded and the district's five buildings are ruined.