

Master plan review reveals spending discrepancies for repairing, replacing schools

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A question of equity is percolating among New Orleans educators, as well as the city's civic and business leaders. They are wondering how a \$1.6 billion master plan proposal to rebuild the city's public schools excludes more than one quarter of the renovations and new buildings deemed necessary.

For some, the proposal reflects shortsighted planning that resulted in elaborate designs for certain schools at the expense of others. And for those critics, the problem is about economics as well as equity: oversized schools are unsustainable, they say.

Martin Behrman Charter School in Algiers is currently slated to receive nothing, but it undeniably needs attention. Termites have carved windowsills and cupboards into sharp edges and devoured flooring throughout the 89-year-old building. Craters in the library floor render a large portion of it unusable. Until recently, layers of chewed wood in the basement cafeteria exposed students to soil underneath the building.

"Anything wooden is being eaten," Principal Rene Lewis-Carter said.

There are other problems. Moisture inside Behrman is causing paint to peel everywhere, especially in the un-air-conditioned main stairwell. The [Recovery School District](#) replaced part of the school's roof as a "critical recovery" project after Hurricane Katrina, but it didn't happen until 2009, Carter-Lewis said.

"From the time of Katrina until then, it just rained in the building," she said as she stood in the school's auditorium, where a puddle formed on the stage underneath a steady drip.

A few blocks away, the new [L.B. Landry High School](#) was recently built for \$59.2 million. Lake Area High School in Gentilly came in at \$39.3 million. [Langston Hughes Academy](#) near the Fair Grounds cost \$30.1 million.

These are the first new schools built after Katrina as part of the [School Facilities Master Plan](#), which was initially released in 2008 and relies on a Federal Emergency Management Agency settlement.

A proposed revision of the master plan released last month calls for 54 school construction and renovation projects in two phases. A third phase with \$422 million for 19 schools would require additional public investment, according to the proposal.

Seven projects in the plan have already been completed at a cost of more than \$200 million, and 19 others are in construction or design with combined estimates of more than \$580 million.

Critics, including Hughes Academy board member Kathy Padian, say the new schools are excessive. The 95,000-square-foot Hughes building is designed for 556 students, or 171 square feet per student. That's about 20 percent more than what a peer review group consisting of educators and architects



Termites have destroyed most of a windowsill in sixth-grade teacher Rima Bensrieti's classroom at Behrman Elementary School in Algiers. (photo by Frank Aymami)

recommended for elementary schools in a March report.

Padian, who participated in the peer review, said common areas such as hallways and maintenance rooms comprise 52 percent of the Hughes, which opened in 2009. Monthly utility bills are averaging about \$12,000 as a result, Padian said.

"No charter school in America would ever build this building with so much common space that we have to pay for," Padian said.

Four high schools are currently in design at 204 square feet per student for an estimated cost of \$236 million. Building one or two additional high schools at 175 square feet per student would save 25 to 37 percent on annual operating costs, according to an analysis provided by Paul Flower, the peer review chairman and president and CEO of Woodward Design Build.

[New Orleans College Prep](#) Director Ben Kleban, who helped gather the data, said planning for more high schools with smaller footprints is more equitable and efficient.



"You can build

more of them, serve more communities, serve more kids, and, at the same time, save financial resources in perpetuity," Kleban said.

The cumulative cost to renovate or replace 26 now-occupied buildings is 68 percent higher in the master plan than what consulting firm Jacobs/CSRS Program Management suggests be spent, according to an analysis it conducted for the RSD.

RSD spokeswoman Siona LaFrance explained the discrepancy as the cost of building "21st century schools" instead of simply replacing what existed before the hurricane. The master plan defines 21st century schools as those with media centers, performing arts spaces and competition gymnasiums, among other specifications.

A group of civic, public policy and business organizations led by the Bureau of Governmental Research [sharply criticized the proposed plan](#) this month, calling for a "more utilitarian approach" with fewer "architectural dreams and luxuries."

No one is arguing that New Orleans schools were wholly adequate before the storm. Lewis-Carter attributed Behrman's deficiencies to "years of institutional neglect," and LaFrance noted that building assessments after the hurricane found \$1 billion in deferred maintenance across the city.

But the consultant's cost summary provides a glimpse of savings that might accrue with scaled-back plans. For the 26 projects alone, the difference between the cost summary and the master plan is \$244.7 million, or 58 percent of the current proposal's unfunded portion.

The proposal awaits public comment and state approval, but RSD Superintendent John White, barely three months in office, is slowing the process for more consideration. He says the plan should cover more students but is not guaranteeing money will be spent at every school.

Tara O'Neill, policy manager at the [Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives](#), favors a "roofs and windows first" approach that prioritizes basic needs in all buildings before elaborate plans. White said this is worthy of consideration but not as a single premise from which to plan.

"What we should avoid is being dogmatic," White said. "It's not that there is a right premise or that there's a wrong premise. It's the idea that there's only one premise. That is a problem."

White also emphasized the FEMA settlement is to "fund what was destroyed" by the hurricane and "not to be the capital plan for the school system ongoing." He was responding to the BGR group's criticism that taxpayers will have to foot a bond issue to pay for what the plan doesn't cover.

But White's point could also be taken to question spending the FEMA settlement strictly on 21st century specifications, especially with so many buildings excluded.

"All we ever heard was 'with this FEMA lump sum settlement, every child in New Orleans will be in a 21st century school,'" Padian said. "I think everybody knew from the get go it wasn't going to happen."

The settlement, combined with other assistance, brought in more than \$2 billion in federal disaster funding for schools. About 20 percent of that was spent on post-hurricane needs.

White's determination to steer away from a single methodology may frustrate critics who say the plan suffers a lack of coherent policy.

"We have asked time and time again, over a period of years, for the districts to put forth the criteria that they used to put schools into phases. None have been forthcoming," O'Neill said.

White disputes such criticism. To the contrary, he said, the plan relies too heavily on demographic predictions of where students will live in the future to determine school locations, resulting in mismatches between building plans and school programs.

Other circumstantial realities need consideration, White said, including the demand for health services and vocational education.

"There is a legacy of neglect and in some cases prejudice that made school facilities a historically undervalued resource," White said. "That's not a factor that can be disregarded."•

Cost discrepancies

A CityBusiness review of the School Facilities Master Plan shows the Orleans Parish School Board and Recovery School District plan to spend far more than a consultant, Jacobs/CSRS, says is needed to refurbish or rebuild certain schools in some cases. Four examples are illustrated below. An RSD spokeswoman said the difference in cost comes from replacing what existed before Hurricane Katrina versus building a 21st century school.

School	Project type	Jacobs/CSRS*	Master Plan
Thurgood Marshall High School	Renovation	\$8.3 million	\$19 million
Warren Easton High School	Renovation	\$16 million	\$38.8 million
Paul Habans Elementary	New	\$9.6 million	\$27.9 million
A.D. Crossman Elementary	Renovation	\$2.8 million	\$12.4 million

*Figures include a 10 percent adjustment for soft costs, such as architectural and engineering fees