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Move to New Orleans pays off for principal; Former Chicago dean runs La. school

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When Lawrence Perkins crammed clothes and a TV into his car and drove off to New Orleans last August, he had 900 miles to wonder if moving to a disaster area to head a school for poor, mostly Spanish-speaking kids would be worth the sacrifice.

He wondered if the Esperanza Charter school would be able to overcome the economic ruin and emotional scars of a community literally upended by Hurricane Katrina's devastating floods in August 2005.

His questions were answered about five minutes into the school's grand opening celebration.

"I've been a teacher for over 10 years and I'd never seen more kids so excited about going to school," Perkins said.

A dean at the Octavio Paz charter school on Chicago's Near West Side until August, Perkins took the helm of the new school that even before opening boasted the largest concentration of Hispanic students in the city.

TENSE MOMENTS

Chicago's **United Neighborhood Organization** opened Esperanza -- Spanish for "hope" -- to provide a safe learning environment for kindergarten through 8th-grade children whose parents stayed after the waters receded or came in to help rebuild the town. Three Chicago-area teachers also made the move.

"You talk about faith -- you don't know what it is until you actually go there and it's just you and the man upstairs and you have to build everything from scratch," Perkins said. "There was loneliness -- many of the staff came from somewhere else -- but we'd put our arms around each other and say 'We're in this thing together.' "

The first half of the academic year went off without too many hitches, considering the obstacles in renovating a building for the school and getting kids enrolled. "We never thought it was going to be easy. It has been a challenge, but the school gives us a sense of inspiration to keep us going," UNO president Juan Rangel said.

He pointed to tense moments making payroll and reimbursement mishaps with Louisiana's Recovery School District, which is headed by ex-Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas. "Having that relationship helped a lot but there's always bureaucracy -- that's just reality."

But emotional and behavioral problems from the trauma of Katrina never overcame the students or faculty. "I thought discipline was going to be the major problem," Perkins said. "With so many who lost their

families and homes -- what they went through -- I thought that would be the challenge. Really my biggest challenge is gum chewing."

Perkins is especially proud of the progress the kids have made in picking up English in the school-wide immersion program. "When I came into the building, so many kids were speaking no English. Now, in four months, most are speaking a very fluent standard English," he said.

After the winter break, Perkins will head back to New Orleans to get ready for spring state testing.

On the 900-mile journey, Perkins will know this: "It's well worth the trip!"

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Photo: Lawrence Perkins speaks to students at Esperanza Charter school in New Orleans, where he transferred after leaving Octavio Paz on Chicago's Near West Side. ;

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