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IMPROVING THEIR GRADES; Construction is proceeding apace in New Orleans schools

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Three months ago, it seemed impossible that Thurgood Marshall Middle School would be renovated in time to hold classes in September. Even the contractors thought so.

The 99-year-old school on Canal Street took on 1 to 2 feet of water after Hurricane Katrina. The first floor looked like "a dungeon," state Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek said, and it hadn't been gutted since the storm, which blew out windows and heavily damaged the school's roof. Bathrooms and ceiling tiles were crumbling after years of deferred maintenance.

But when Pastorek and other officials toured Marshall on Saturday, they found new floors, ceilings and lighting and a new kitchen. The asphalt for a new parking lot was put in Friday, and the school will be ready for classes Sept. 4.

The visit to Marshall was part of a tour of several schools in the state-run Recovery School District scheduled to open next month for the first time since Katrina.

"A month ago, it looked like it was possible," Pastorek said. "About two weeks ago, it looked like it was real."

As many as 26 additional public schools will open in New Orleans this school year, depending on enrollment, with the Recovery District operating as many as 17 of them. As many as 6,000 new students are expected to enroll in the city's public schools, the bulk of them in Recovery District schools, for a total of more than 32,000.

Nine of the schools opening will be independently run public charter schools. A handful will be in buildings that underwent major renovations after being damaged in the storm and in many cases were dilapidated before then because of lack of maintenance. Another batch of schools will open in modular buildings, which are meant to be a temporary fix to find room for students. A few schools will share campuses in separate modular buildings.

Modular buildings at four campuses -- Livingston High, Fannie C. Williams Elementary, Abramson High and Coghill Elementary -- will be ready for Sept. 4, said Pastorek, who toured Livingston on Saturday.

Modular buildings at Carver, Gregory Elementary and Langston Hughes Elementary are expected to be ready by early to mid-September, he said.

Two schools -- a Recovery District high school and a public charter school -- will have separate modular buildings on the Abramson campus in eastern New Orleans. The Carver campus will also be used by a district-run elementary school and a high school in separate buildings.

Pastorek has tried to speed up the pace of construction since he became state superintendent in March. Several Louisiana National Guard members were brought in to serve as a facilities team for a district that didn't have one.

The dizzying pace of maintenance and construction work underscored how the storm worsened the condition of many of the city's school buildings, some of which were at least a century old and already crumbling.

While contractors continue to renovate old buildings, Pastorek is looking to start construction on new ones.

New Orleans hasn't seen a new school building since two elementary schools were built in 2003. One of those, Henry C. Schaumburg in eastern New Orleans, was damaged in the storm but has been renovated and will reopen in September.

Pastorek said he intends to break ground on as many as five new buildings by the end of 2007. Recovery District Superintendent Paul Vallas said a master plan to be completed next year will drive a capital building plan that the state-run district is developing.

For several hours Saturday, Pastorek, Vallas and others walked in and out of classrooms, bathrooms and kitchens, all of which had been refurbished in recent months.

Workers at Gentilly Terrace Elementary installed more than 200 new windows and upgraded the plumbing and the kitchen. Teachers' desks sit in boxes, waiting to be set up. "We're going to be ready," said Rene Becnel, CEO of Construction Masters, a Metairie company handling the renovation of Gentilly Terrace and other schools.

At the former A.D. Crossman Elementary on Carrollton Avenue, now home to the Esperanza Charter School, the plumbing, windows and ceiling tiles, among other things, have been replaced.

"It looks like it's a brand new building," said Juan Rangel, president of the **United Neighborhood Organization**, a nonprofit, Chicago-based community group that will run Esperanza.

Much of the work has focused on upgrading kitchens and bathrooms at schools that already were open. As many as 300 bathrooms in more than two dozen schools have been refurbished. Many that were run down and didn't have stalls before the storm will be ready for students in September.

"The main objective is to bring these up to humane standards," Pastorek said.

At Marshall, two freshly planted palm trees sat in the front yard. On the second floor, Pastorek stopped by a water fountain and pointed to a plug and outlet attached to the wall, where students could get at them. Contractors said they could change the wiring so the connection wouldn't be accessible.

"If we're down to that kind of issue, then we're doing good," Pastorek said.

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