

**Statement from Larry Carter, President,  
United Teachers of New Orleans on  
Remarks Made by the U.S. Education Secretary**

*On Jan. 30, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan referred to Hurricane Katrina as “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans.”*

**NEW ORLEANS**—As citizens of New Orleans, and members of its education community, we were shocked, angered and hurt at Secretary Duncan’s comments over the weekend. I am pleased that he called me to offer his heartfelt apologies for his poor choice of words and I appreciated that he also apologized publicly in the national media.

But, in addition to being insensitive to the scores of Katrina victims, as well as the 8,500 educators who were fired after the storm, Secretary Duncan’s statement painted a distorted picture about what was happening in our schools prior to the storm. The notion that nothing was being done to improve public education in New Orleans until after Katrina is pure fiction.

The fact is public schools in New Orleans were already on a path to improvement before Hurricane Katrina, thanks in large part to the teachers. United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) played an integral role in that turnaround. Our union was providing professional development for teachers in all public schools before the storm. A Teaching and Learning Task Force had been meeting as a part of our collective bargaining agreement, which allowed teachers to bring their teaching ideas and concerns to the superintendent. Schools in New Orleans—including the lowest performing—were meeting their *pre-Katrina* growth targets under NCLB.

Our efforts to turn around our education system continued in the immediate aftermath of the storm and continue in the reform efforts today. We have re-instituted the Teaching and Learning Task Force in partnership with the Recovery School District (RSD) and New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). These working committees provide a forum for educators to directly interact with the superintendents of both districts in order to use their classroom expertise to improve learning conditions for our students and working conditions for teachers and support staff. In partnership with the RSD, NOPS, and charter school employees, UTNO continues to provide relevant, research-based professional development training for our educators. It should be noted that the schools that are experiencing the most growth are the ones that employ the largest percentage of veteran (read: pre-Katrina) educators.

Progress has been made, but we are still a long way from our goal of transforming all of our children’s schools into model learning environments. Throughout its history, UTNO has remained committed to that goal, and to working with anyone else who shares it. It is our sincere hope that Secretary Duncan’s comments, while unfortunate, will at least provide an opportunity to set the record straight and open a fresh, constructive dialog on education in New Orleans.