

If You Want to See Change, Head to New Orleans

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This past Monday, Center for Green Schools Director [Rachel Gutter](#) and I presented plaques to the [first four LEED certified schools](#) in New Orleans. These four schools represented not only a huge accomplishment for the Recovery School District and the city, but also for Louisiana, with these schools being the first in the state to become certified. It was great to be back in New Orleans, and with the commitment to rebuild all 80 schools in its master plan to LEED Silver minimum, I expect to return many times over the next decade.

When I got to New Orleans in 2008 in a role that would later become the [Center for Green Schools Fellowship Program](#), I was there because I needed something different than a job at an architecture firm. When I left two years later, I came away with a clear knowledge that the buildings we put kids in during their school days matter, and that the culture of how a city cares for its youngest can start shifting with the quality of its schools. This change in how I see my work wasn't immediate, but there are a few moments that set those wheels in irreversible motion.

One is embodied in the [photo of a little girl's face](#) full of wonder as she walks into her first day at Langston Hughes Academy, the first school—and first new public building—built after Katrina. Another is the pure desperation I felt touring one of New Orleans' worst school buildings with our newly-hired indoor air quality manager, seeing mildew on the walls and students wandering aimlessly. And then there was the statement a high school girl read at the ribbon cutting for the new Greater Gentilly High School, a statement that brought the state superintendent to tears. This school—finally, *this* school—"yearns for my success."

Center for Green Schools team presenting the LEED plaque

As people gathered around at Wilson Elementary for the LEED plaque dedications this week, I was reminded that the transformation of the schools in New Orleans couldn't be broken down into academic reform and facilities rebuilding. It couldn't be broken down between the principals speaking eloquently that day and their students, between the adults at the school district who dedicate their lives to lifting kids up and the parents who work overtime to keep their children healthy and happy. Or between New Orleans' hope for a better future and one little girl at Langston Hughes' hope for a better life. And it also can't be broken down between the transformation of a city and the transformation of [one young architect from Little Rock](#).

Nine new schools will open in the next few months in the city—all of which are designed to reach LEED Silver certification. And the project management team is gearing up to begin one retrofit, renovation or rebuilding project a week for the next 60 weeks. The city's schools have become centers of community pride and action—something I am proud to have been a part of. I can tell you from personal experience: if you want to see change, head to New Orleans.

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