

**THE RETHINKERS' SPEECHES**  
**Healing Our Schools, Healing Our Earth:**  
***Visions for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Katrina***  
**July 15, 2010**

**I. Introduction**

Terriana Julien & Arianna McKnight

***Terriana Julien:***

We Rethinkers are really happy to hold our news conference this year in the beautiful Langston Hughes Academy. The principal of Langston Hughes, Ms. Jeanyll Morris, is here with us today and will say a few words in a minute.

We spent a great deal of our summer here learning about restorative justice practices, the past and present state of public education in New Orleans and the impact of the oil spill on our schools and local food economy.

Langston Hughes is not only beautiful, it is very energy efficient like most schools built after Katrina. These schools are one of the best things that has happened in education since the storm. We Rethinkers think that WE are also one of the best things that has happened in education since Katrina!!!!

Our accomplishments range from convincing Superintendent Vallas to renovate 350 bathrooms to getting rid of sporks in almost all public school cafeterias!

These are just a few of our accomplishments. Now Arianna will tell you about our future dreams.

***Arianna McKnight:***

This summer is the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Katrina. So we Rethinkers decided to dream BIG about what great schools could look like by the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. Our dream is to heal our schools and by healing our schools, we begin to heal Mother Earth.

- Each morning, all of us Rethinkers will walk into beautiful sunny schools, just as nice as Langston Hughes. A friendly team of students will meet us at the door, NOT A METAL DETECTOR.
- At lunchtime, our cafeteria will serve us fresh-cooked and delicious food, bought from local farmers and fishermen. We have real plates and knives and spoons. Anything that has to be thrown away is biodegradable, put into a compost pile and returned to the earth.
- When kids get into a fight, they are not suspended. They work out their problem in a reconciliation circle and repair their relationship.

- Our schools make their own electricity from sun and wind and water. Our schools are now an example of how we can prevent an oil spill from ever happening again.

Thank you and enjoy the news conference! Ms. Morris, would you please come up?

## **II. Restorative Justice**

Renee Smith, Lucy Tucker, Kamau Johnson, George Carter, Vernard Carter

### ***Lucy Tucker:***

Here in New Orleans, we are faced with crime and stress, often causing students to resort to violence. Our school system handles these students with behavior problems in a very straight forward way: suspensions and expulsions. The Louisiana Justice Institute's new report on punishment states that, the expulsion rate in RSD schools "is ten times the national rate" and in Louisiana, "only 65.9% of students graduate from high school in four years."

Also, state laws allow schools to **suspend** students for minor misbehavior: for example, "willful disobedience." If students are taken out of school unnecessarily, they fall behind. And by neglecting the harm done, students' relationship with their peers and faculty is left broken.

### ***Renee Smith:***

If we don't change the way we handle behavior problems soon, students are going to stay stressed, and this problem is only going to get worse. Rethinkers believe that we can change this cycle of punishment and anger by putting restorative justice programs into our schools. Restorative justice is whole new way of dealing with offenses, that focuses on repairing harm as opposed to punishing the offender.

### ***Lucy:***

Imagine a safe environment that kids could look forward to everyday; where we can talk out our problems in a peaceful way, with everyone involved. This is possible! It's called a reconciliation circle, and it's already a part of many schools across the country.

Here is how it works: when a problem comes up, everyone affected gets a visit from a reconciliation circle facilitator. They get informed about exactly what will happen in the circle, and they get to **decide** if they want to go or not. In the circle, everyone gets to respond to what happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to fix the harm. The group then decides **together** how to deal with the consequences of the crime and how to repair the harm caused. This summer, Rethink did a training session on restorative justice- about its impact all over the world, and how it works.

### ***Renee:***

Next year we hope to keep working on restorative justice by learning more about it, being a part of some reconciliation circles, and seeing it in action at a few Colorado schools. In these schools, the restorative justice results have been phenomenal. In a minute you will hear from Dr. Title, who has founded many of these programs in Colorado schools. I

would now like to introduce you to Kamau Johnson, who will tell you about our pilot project.

***Kamau Johnson:***

I want to tell you about the pilot program that will take place here at Langston Hughes Academy Charter School. It will be the first restorative justice program in any elementary school in the state of Louisiana!

Langston Hughes is receiving \$50,000 to have Neighborhood Housing Services train the staff and students on how to treat conflict and violence in a whole new way. This training will include teaching us how to have weekly dialogue circles to prevent problems, how to handle offenses after they happen, and much more. The goals for the first year of the program are to reduce suspensions and expulsions by 25 percent and to reduce violent offenses by 40 percent.

Based off my own experience, I understand why restorative justice programs are needed and important.

I have been suspended three times, once for acting out of self-defense, once for a normal fight, and once for a push fight. In New Orleans public schools, that's what happens if you are in a fight. An adult asks both sides of the story and no matter what you say, both kids are suspended. When that happens both kids aren't learning.

In Restorative Justice programs, kids talk about what happened days before the fight and then what happened minutes before. They are asked, "How do you feel? How were you affected? What do you need to repair the harm?" In the end, you work things out with the other person. The way things are now, kids come back after suspension and the blame game starts. You blame this person for getting you suspended and they blame you.

With restorative justice, you resolve a problem, then come up with an agreement. You don't get punished and put the problem aside. The basic idea is that the harm is repaired, the problem is solved and the relationships are mended. Keep that love!

***George Carter:***

When you look out this window, you will see a lot of dirt. But if you come back here next year, you will see this (points to photo). Someday soon, Langston Hughes is going to hold the first outdoor reconciliation circle at a school in Louisiana, maybe in the whole country!

A reconciliation circle is a place for students to work out their problems and come up with solutions. We chose a garden space because we know Mother Nature can help you get in a better mood to solve your problems.

***Vernard Carter:***

Because of the grant from Neighborhood Housing Services, we will actually get to build this reconciliation circle here at Langston Hughes Academy. I want to explain what we included in our design and why (**point to picture**).

- We chose to create the buildings in the shape of a circle. A circle symbolizes equality. No part is more important than another.
- We designed two buildings to accommodate group needs – mainly size. One building is for groups of 10-20 people and the other is for groups of 5-8 people.
- It has tropical plants all around it to make a private place.
- To make the place more private we surrounded it with topical plants. Also we put in a water feature and wind chimes to create peaceful and soothing sounds.
- As you can see, you enter the building on one path and exit on another. Symbolizing the cause of restorative justice, you come in feeling one way and leave feeling better and ready to start on a new path.

Some day we hope that all schools in New Orleans will have reconciliation circles like this one.

***George:***

Here is our list of recommendations.

***Vernard:***

**Recommendation #1: Invite the Rethinkers to your school.** We can tell your students all about restorative justice at a school assembly.

***Renee:***

**Recommendation #2: Send some of your staff to take a training in Restorative Justice.** Here in New Orleans, Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) provides this training.

***Kamau:***

**Recommendation #3: Go visit a school where restorative practices have been working for a few years.** We can help you contact schools in Colorado.

***Lucy:***

**Recommendation #4: Come visit Langston Hughes next year to see the Restorative Justice program at a New Orleans elementary school starting up!** NHS will be training the whole school in restorative practices.

### **III. School Food Report Card**

Ashley Triggs, Victoria Carter, Jada Cooper, Ron Triggs, Earl Poole

***Ashley:***

We have been rethinking school food for a long time! Before we share our vision and recommendations for the future, we want to tell you more about school food and cafeterias NOW, and update you on what progress has been made bringing our original 12 Recommendations for School Food and Cafeterias to life! We are excited to share our first annual Rethink School Food Report, called Time to Rethink School Lunch. Our report was put together by two different groups of Rethinkers: our City-Wide Food Group and our Rethink Club students from Joseph A. Craig Elementary School.

***Victoria:***

In the summer of 2008 the Rethinkers came together to improve school food. Our first step was to make our very own recommendations for how we thought our food and cafeterias should be. Once we got our Superintendent, Paul Vallas, to agree to almost all of our recommendations we told him that we knew our job would be to hold his feet to the fire. In order to do so we shared our recommendations locally, with the Food Policy Advisory Committee, who has adopted all of our recommendations! We also presented our recommendations at several national conferences in Oregon, Georgia and California.

Last summer we decided to make a school food report card. We wanted to measure how much progress different schools and school food providers had made on our recommendations. Rethinkers from our City-Wide Food Group created a survey that asked people questions about each of our recommendations like, “Are there vegetarian options at every meal at your school?” This spring, we conducted the surveys at each of our Rethink Club schools. At each school we surveyed the principal, 4 teachers or staff members and 10% of the student body.

In order to understand exactly how we graded each school, take a look at the Grading Template that we put in the press packets.

We did this research so that we can improve school food because as Rethinkers and New Orleanians we know that food is an important part of what makes us us. The information we collected this year helps us to know how each of the Rethink club schools are doing at this moment and how far they need to go to live up to the Rethink students’ standards.

Now, for the grades. Drum roll please.....

**Arthur Ashe Charter School**

***Jada:***

The grade for Arthur Ashe Charter School and it’s school food provider, Sodexo, is a...

**B- (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Ashe serves freshly-cooked food and is currently composting! We hope that by the end of next year Ashe will serve local ingredients in their meals!

### **Joseph A Craig Elementary School**

*Earl:*

The grade for Joseph A Craig Elementary School and it's school food provider, Sodexo, is an...

**F (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Craig plans to start a school garden next year and currently serves local dishes once a week! We hope that by the end of next year students at Craig will have real forks, knives and spoons to eat with!

### **John Dibert Community School**

*Victoria:*

The grade for John Dibert Community School and it's school food provider, Sodexo, is a...

**C (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Dibert no longer uses sporks and has a 45 minute lunch period! We hope that by the end of next year Dibert will have a compost system to go along with their garden!

### **Edgar P Harney Elementary**

*Ashley:*

The grade for Edgar P Harney Elementary and it's school food provider, Sodexo, is a...

**D (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Harney has a vegetable garden and a hand-washing sink in the cafeteria! We hope that by the end of next year students at Harney will have forks, knives and spoons to eat with rather than sporks!

### **Langston Hughes Academy**

*Victoria:*

The grade for Langston Hughes Academy and it's school food provider, Sodexo, is a...

**B- (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Langston Hughes has a hand-washing sink in it's beautiful, new cafeteria and has a small vegetable garden that they plan to expand next year! We hope that by the end of next year Langston Hughes will no long use styrofoam trays!

### **Live Oak Elementary School**

*Ashley:*

The grade for Live Oak Elementary School and it's school food provider, Sodexo, is a...

## **D- (Ron will announce the letter grade)!**

We are excited to report that Live Oak has no silent lunches and they eat a local dish once a week! We hope that by the end of next year Live Oak will have a school garden!

### ***Earl:***

This year in our two Rethink clubs at Joseph A. Craig Elementary we decided that we wanted to change our school food. We felt that we needed to learn more about what the other Craig students thought about school food, so we started a project that became the second part of this report. We created a survey that we gave to almost all of the 5th-8th graders at our school.

After we surveyed other students we went to the cafeteria and took pictures and field notes. We took some pictures of school lunch to show what a lunch tray looks like when students receive it and what school lunch trays look like when students are finished eating. In the pictures, a lot of the trays look almost exactly the same because many students don't eat very much of their lunch. In fact, the day we took our field notes we saw many students who would take their lunch and throw it straight in the trash without eating any of the food!

Once we completed our research, we turned all of our findings into a report and came up with recommendations, which we presented to Ms. Prevost, our school principal. She listened carefully and told us that she would set up a meeting for us with our cafeteria staff. We really appreciated the way she took our recommendations seriously.

Now we would like to share some of the most interesting things we found out while conducting our research. Drum roll please...

### ***Jada:***

66% of students at Craig reported that they do not eat school lunch. Additionally, 50% of the students reported that they feel hungry ALL day. We believe that hunger affects students' ability to concentrate and may have been one of the reasons why Craig's school performance score was below average.

### ***Earl:***

While taking field notes in the cafeteria, we interviewed the janitor to ask how much trash is thrown out every day at school. He told us that, on average, Sodexo throws away 30 bags of trash from the lunchroom every day, weighing about 30 pounds each. That means that Sodexo throws away 900 pounds of lunchroom trash a day, and approximately 150,000 pounds a year! We think this is unacceptable! We hope that by next year we will have reusable trays, plates and utensils and food that students would rather eat than throw away!

### ***Victoria:***

This is the first year of our school food report card project. We knew that no school or school food provider would get a perfect grade this year and we really appreciate all the schools for allowing us to survey their students and staff. We hope that by this time next year each school and school food provider will improve by at least one letter grade. We really hope that schools will work together to share ideas about how to improve their school food and cafeterias!

***Ashley:***

We would like to thank all of the principals who allowed us to come conduct this important research at their schools. And let us know if you would like your school to be part of next year's report card project!

**IV. School Food Vision and Recommendations**

Alana Hall & Jashon Butler

***Alana Hall:***

When we heard the results of the school food report card, we were sad to learn just how many of our recommendations have not been adopted and were shocked to learn how much waste our cafeterias produced. We came up with a new vision for school food and cafeterias for 2015:

***Jashon Butler:***

**Vision 2015:** Every school will serve fresh, tasty, local food prepared in a fully-equipped kitchen. When students enter the cafeteria, they will be able to wash their hands at hand washing sinks. As they walk up to the lunch line, they will be able to read all of the delicious ingredients that went into their meal off of a large menu. When students sit down to eat, they will eat on real plates with real utensils and they will enjoy their school meals, not throw them away. Schools will serve food that makes students and the environment healthy.

***Alana:***

**Recommendation #5: Start buying local food this year.** Serve at least one local ingredient once a week at every school.

***Jashon:***

**Recommendation #6: Install hand-washing stations in all cafeterias.** (New schools have them already, thanks to Rethink.) Make sure that teachers give students the permission and time to use sinks once these sinks.

***Alana:***

**Recommendation #7: Tell students what they are eating and make the food healthy.** Post a sign with all the ingredients in our meals each day. Get rid of highly processed food.

***Jashon:***

**Recommendation #8: Stop the waste!** Find out how much waste your cafeteria is

producing and reduce it by half before the end of the school year. Use real trays, eating utensils, plates and bowls. Or, use biodegradable products and toss them in a school compost pile after meals. Set up “tasting stations” in the cafeteria where kids can try food on the menu and then order only what they will eat it. Stop serving the same full plate of food to all students.

## **V. Oil-Free Schools**

Mekayla Chisom, Danny Do, Jordan Vigne

### ***Mekayla Chisom:***

How many of you know how many days the oil spill has been in the Gulf? Well, if you don't know, today is the 86<sup>th</sup> day of the Gulf oil spill. Fishermen and shrimpers can't do their work, and our local environment, culture and economy are in danger.

We Rethinkers – besides the vegetarians – love shrimp, crawfish, crab and many other kinds of seafood. It's part of who we are - my first real meal was gumbo! When I think about the oil spill, I think about all the shrimping companies, seafood restaurants, and seafood markets that are going out of business.

### ***Jordan Vigne:***

I think about my future children, the children of New Orleans, and children all over the world who might never get to taste fresh, delicious, Louisiana seafood.

### ***Mekayla:***

If I had one wish, I would wish for a way to get rid of all oil in the Gulf.

### ***Danny Do:***

The oil spill has a large impact on my family. My dad is a shrimper and a vast percentage of our income comes from his job. Not only can my dad not shrimp, but BP is also taking a long time to respond to his request to clean up the oil. This leaves him and many other shrimpers feeling useless to their families. Their feeling of uselessness shows a loss of pride in themselves: my dad hasn't told me about this directly, but he's usually talking to his crew about how he hates being home having nothing to do. He's aware of the danger of shrimping close to the oil spill, which is why he hasn't taken the risk of shrimping, yet he also knows that this year could be the end of his job because the Gulf won't be restored for decades – or even centuries – to come. It pains me deep down knowing that my dad won't be as happy as he used to be after this year. Shrimping is all he has known since he was a teenager, and it will be over 30 years of his life drowned and drenched in oil.

### ***Jordan:***

When Rethink found out about the oil spill, we decided to speak to the people affected by it. Earlier this summer, we took a trip to the Crescent City Farmers Market to interview local shrimpers and ask how we can help. Well, their response was: “All you can do is pray.” Hearing this made me feel helpless. But even though the Rethinkers can't do

anything to stop the spill or clean up the Gulf, we can make sure that there is never another oil spill. We know this is a big dream, but our vision for 2015 is that all schools will be oil free!

***Danny:***

Right now, schools are practically drowning in oil! The following are only a few of the many oil products schools need: gasoline for school buses, pens and pencils for taking notes, and Smartboards for teaching lessons. I would like everyone in the audience to find one thing in the room only that was not produced with or transported by oil. Well as you can see, there is nothing in here that doesn't rely on oil. Oil is an epidemic, and for over a century we have built our economy and our world around this product. If we want to prevent another oil spill, we need to start weaning ourselves off this product and begin searching for new ideas. Now is the perfect time to get moving, and schools are a great place to start!

***Jordan:***

In our dream schools, energy will come from renewable sources like sun, wind and water. The places we will learn are in rooms full of natural sunlight – with huge, low energy windows – and beautiful outdoor classrooms. Don't worry, we'll plant lots of trees to provide shade and prevent sunburn! Our schools will have sensors to control the temperature and turn off the lights when the room is empty, and our roofs will be painted white to reflect sunlight and keep the building cool. All these features will make our schools more energy efficient – not to mention more welcoming and comfortable.

***Mekayla:***

Here in New Orleans, most kids ride buses to schools that are far away from their homes. Our dream is that by 2015, more kids will go to the school that is in their neighborhood. Can you imagine it? The more kids starting to walk and bike to school, the more we can cut down on our need for transportation – and oil. Plus, kids won't have to wake up early in the morning and spend lots of time stuck on a school bus. To make sure that students still have the chance to go to any school they want, we can use leftover vegetable oil from our cafeterias to power all remaining school buses. This means that if a kid wants to go to a school not in their neighborhood, they can still go there without using petroleum oil.

***Danny:***

We might not be experts on oil-free schools yet, but we're planning to learn a lot more all year long. We're even partnering with the US Green Building Council to make a movie about oil-free schools! We know our dream is a big one, but we want to share four recommendations for how schools can start moving in the right direction.

Now Jordan and Mekayla will announce our 4 recommendations for our advancement to oil free schools.

***Jordan:***

**Recommendation #9: Measure waste throughout the school.** Figure out how high your air conditioners run, how much paper you throw away and which lights are left on

too long.

***Mekayla:***

**Recommendation #10: Create Green Teams in every school.** Student Green Teams can find ways to cut down on waste and convince other kids to get with the program.

***Jordan:***

**Recommendation #11: No more incandescent light bulbs!** Replace those wasteful old bulbs with compact fluorescent ones. They use two-thirds less energy and last ten times longer! They also produce 70 percent less heat, which helps reduce the amount of energy used to cool schools.

***Mekayla:***

**Recommendation 12: Set up a recycling program!** The typical student produces about 75 pounds of waste each year! Once you have recycling bins, teach everyone how to use them. Don't let them sit empty, like they do at some schools now.

***Danny:***

We also have an unofficial recommendation – adopt all our food and cafeteria recommendations! If we buy more local food, stop using oil-heavy products like Styrofoam trays and plastic utensils, and compost our food waste, we'll be one step closer to oil-free schools!

## **VI. Closing**

Terriana Julien & Ron Triggs

***Terriana:***

This concludes Rethink's 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer News Conference. Our summer has been a lot of fun, but a lot of work! We have used music, drama and storytelling to create our visions for schools long after many of us have graduated.

***Ron:***

Before you leave, please check out the accordion book our storytelling group created, called *Welcome to Our Lives*.

***Terriana:***

The book is a combination of creative writing, interviews, and art about our visions. We hope you like it! Our hope is that we have inspired you to take steps in your schools and communities to heal our earth. Thanks to everyone who shared their information and resources with us this summer.

***Ron:***

Thanks for coming and we'll see you next summer!