

New Orleans elementary school holds coat drive for homeless students

Tom Hall**31 December 2014**

In an event which underscored the horrifying social conditions faced by working-class children in America, the McDonogh 32 Literacy Charter School in New Orleans recently held a fundraiser in order to provide coats for homeless students attending the school, according to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

At least 12 percent of the school's 600 students are currently homeless, according to a school administrator who spoke with the newspaper.

The fundraising event was organized on the initiative of several eighth-grade students who noticed that many of their classmates were without coats during a recent spate of cold weather. The students failed to meet their fundraising goal, and the school is still accepting donations on their behalf, in an effort to purchase coats for the homeless students.

McDonogh 32 Literacy Charter School focuses on "high-risk" students. In addition to high levels of homelessness, fully 98 percent of all its students are eligible for free or reduced school lunches, a key indicator of poverty among school-age children. Moreover, nearly one quarter of its student body is either in special education programs or receives accommodations for a disability.

The fact that so many school-age children and their families at a single school are unable to afford housing or winter clothing is a devastating exposure of the social conditions in the city of New Orleans, which has been used as a testing ground for the ruling elite's program of austerity and privatization since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005.

New Orleans has a child poverty rate of 39 percent, among the highest in the nation. This figure has rebounded since a temporary drop after Hurricane Katrina, when many impoverished residents remained stranded throughout the country with no means of

returning home. The state of Louisiana has the fourth-highest child poverty rate in the nation, at 21 percent.

Enormous numbers of children in New Orleans are affected by hunger. A 2010 survey found that 30 percent of all households with children in the metropolitan area suffered from food hardship. As of 2012, almost 17,000 children in the city itself were at risk of hunger, according to Feeding America.

Students attending public or charter schools in the city are overwhelmingly impoverished. Eighty-four percent of public school students in New Orleans are eligible for subsidized lunches. This is an increase of 7 percent since 2005. In half the city's schools, 95 percent or more of the student body is eligible for the lunches.

Child poverty has surged worldwide since the 2008 financial crisis. A recent study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that the number of children living in poverty in the developed countries has grown by 2.6 million since 2008. The United States had the fifth highest child poverty rate among the 41 countries included in the survey. The growth of child poverty has been driven to a great extent by the relentless cuts to social programs and benefits enforced by governments worldwide.

The situation at McDonogh 32 encapsulates the perversity of this process. Even as the financial oligarchs on Wall Street reap vast profits from charter schools such as McDonogh 32—to the tune of over \$200 million in New Orleans alone for the current school year—students are forced to hold a charity drive to secure the most basic necessities of life.

Aside from their profitability, charter schools are increasingly used by the US ruling class as mechanisms for channeling working-class and poor students into low-wage jobs. In October, the school hosted the 2nd

annual “family job fair” of the Algiers Charter School Association, which operates the school. Over 100 students attended the event, according to the *Times-Picayune*, which hosted booths from such employers as Home Depot, Family Dollar and the New Orleans police.

For those students not deemed fit for such rewarding careers, charter schools can quickly become their entry point into increasingly privatized juvenile detention programs.

McDonogh 32 regularly hands out Saturday detentions to students, for which the charter operator charges the overwhelmingly impoverished parents at its schools a \$25 fee, according to local investigative journalism publication *The Lens*. If parents refuse to pay for the detentions, which are served at the charter company’s own in-house youth detention facility, the so-called “Developing & Educating Alternative Learners Center,” students face a prolonged suspension, according to a spokeswoman for the privatized education company.

“We see [our fees] as an investment for the parents, because they are getting these crucial services,” a spokeswoman for the company told *The Lens*.



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