

Troubled Wright Thrives as SUNO Charter School

Officials: Wright struggled under OPSB

by Stephen Maloney
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When people ask Ida Calvin where to send their children to school, she tells them Sophie B. Wright Charter School.

Calvin has three grandchildren at Wright, and Willie Smith, her oldest grandson, can't seem to stay away from the school even though he now attends Sarah T. Reed High School, she said.

Smith regularly volunteers around campus, never failing to visit Wright principal Sharon Clark, who keeps track of her former students as they progress through the educational system.

"I like to come see my old teachers," Smith said. "This is one of the best schools I have been to. I want to be a role model to other students like the teachers here were to me."

Clark has seen dozens of students like Smith return during her seven years at principal. The students are easy to recognize but nothing else about Wright looks the same.

"It's almost like being in a Catholic school environment now," Clark said. "We have no discipline problems. There are no gang issues. The only complaint about the students I hear from the teachers is that they don't tuck their shirts in. We have close to 97 percent attendance. Teachers want to send their children to school here now, and you know you are doing something right when that happens."

Southern University of New Orleans officially chartered Wright as of July 1, 2005.

The federal government granted Wright \$200,000 when it was chartered, and SUNO has donated \$20,000 along with its operational expertise. Clark said the school's operating budget comes from the state's Minimum Foundation Program, which provided \$6,810 per 325 students, or just over \$2.2 million.

Since becoming a charter, the school has made a long series of transitions, Clark said.

According to preliminary reports, only two of the school's 24 fourth-graders failed this year's Louisiana Educational Assessment Program test and 70 percent of eighth-graders passed, Clark said.

It wasn't always this way. Wright was a prime example of a failed Orleans Parish Middle School by consistently offering a failing performance in the past, according to Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Vice President Leslie Jacobs.

"This was a very failed school," Jacobs said. "BESE invested all this money, and it stayed failing. We chartered the school to SUNO, and it was only open a few weeks before the storm hit. Now it is definitely doing much better."

In 2004, Wright earned a School Performance Score of 31.3, up 21 percent from 25.9 a year before, according to Louisiana Department of Education.

Performance scores are based on a number of factors, including LEAP test results and attendance, and Wright's failing scores saddled the school with academically unacceptable performance in 2004, the last year the results were available.

While this year's performance has yet to be determined, Jacobs said Wright is already a successful charter takeover. "What's interesting to me is what doesn't stand out," Jacobs said. "You haven't had a change of school leadership. You haven't had a real change in kids. I don't think you've had a fundamental change in how curriculum and instruction is being delivered. So I don't really know what is different with Sophie B. Wright. But the school is going to come out with a much better school performance score this year than what it had."

The students are challenged more now than before, Jacobs said, but it isn't slowing performance. Clark attributes the school's success to the charter school structure, which she said has made her job enjoyable once again.

"Under the (Orleans Parish) School Board, we had no supplies, no flooring in parts of the school, very little parental support and we had an auditorium that we couldn't use for the last six years because they couldn't fix the floor," Clark said. "Now we have freedom and the empowerment to do better things for the kids. We have freedom from things that don't have anything to do with students, and that is making all the difference."



Former Sophie B. Wright student Willie Smith, left, stands with principal Sharon Clark and his grandmother Ida Calvin, who has sent all four of her grandchildren to Wright. (PHOTO BY STEPHEN MALONEY)



Sophie B. Wright Charter School has transitioned from a failing public middle school to a successful Charter school