

Be encouraged!

Even as he and fellow citizens of New Orleans mark the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Michael Molina's upbeat message to the adults and children who suffered the catastrophe is: "Be encouraged!"

Despite the "shock doctrine" style takeover of New Orleans public schools, the spirit of community and dedication to quality public education remains encouragingly resilient, said Molina, a teacher, Yale-educated lawyer, award-winning rapper and founder of New Roots, a program for youth displaced by Katrina.

In a moving presentation to 600 BC teachers at summer conference, Molina recalled the natural, human and political disaster that left 80% of the city destroyed, more than 1,800 people dead and one million people homeless. "I lost my childhood home and my first school, but that was a lot less than others lost," he said.

In the immediate wake of Katrina, the pro-privatization forces moved swiftly to take over the public schools in New Orleans, which they seized upon as a prime opportunity for education entrepreneurs.

Only two months after the hurricane struck, while teachers and their families were still scattered and rescue workers were still pulling bodies from the water, all 8,500 public school teachers and administrators were fired. Why? To break the union, he said, because it provided the core of resistance to the privatization agenda.

The state then took over the locally elected school board and moved the centre of power miles away to the state capital in Baton Rouge. The federal government dumped \$24 million into charter schools, this in a city with no electricity. As a result, today, more than half of all New Orleans schools are charter schools—the highest in the United States.

To learn more about Michael Molina's work, visit his website <http://www.momolina.com/>