

# Lafayette Academy starts with clean slate

Charter school scraps international company in favor of local educator

By Stephen Maloney

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WHEN NEW ORLEANS native Mickey Landry arrived at Lafayette Academy Charter School's Carrollton Avenue campus as the new head of school in July, the school was in a state of extreme disrepair.

Trash littered classrooms, entire hallways had been stripped of tiles forcing children to walk on uneven concrete, toilets had not been flushed all summer and paint was peeling from the walls.

"The fifth was something you wouldn't want your dog to walk in," Landry said. "I



Lafayette Academy fourth-grade teacher Terry Killory helps students Wayne LeBant, left, Briame Miller and Ryan Jiles, obscured, with a project in math class.

can't explain it. I don't know why you would let children go to school like this."

The fledgling charter school sported grades as ragged as its physical campus after the 2006-07 school year, its first year of operation.

Forty-nine out of 98 fourth-grade students failed the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program test, even after summer remediation and retesting. The poor LEAP showing prevented 50 percent of the fourth-grade class from advancing to the fifth grade.

These abject failures caught the attention of the Choice Foundation, the school's chartering company, which recently scrapped a \$773,000 contract with the school's management company, Atlanta-based Mosaica Education Inc.

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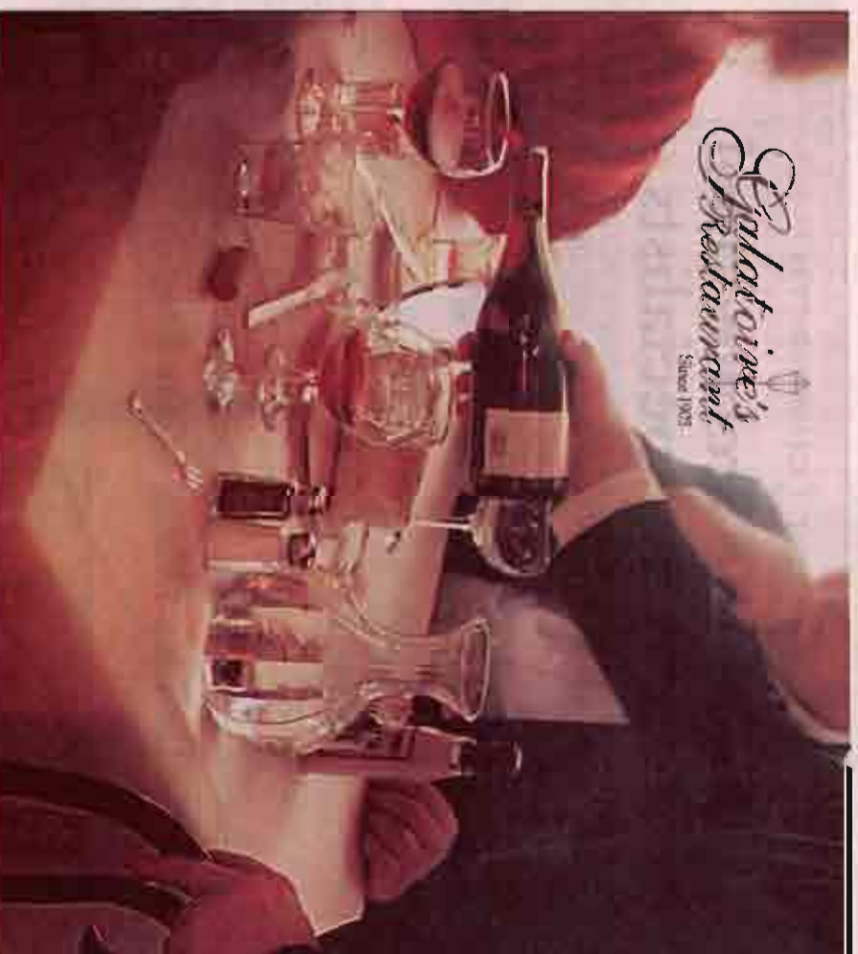
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Lafayette Academy fourth-grade teacher Catherine Stoner leads students, from left, Taylor Anderson, Lauren Deal, Tatyana Thompson and Jacoby Hampton in a reading exercise.

Choice hired Mosaica before the 2006-07 school year to oversee everything from classroom study to janitorial services at Lafayette, but foundation board vice chairman Jim Swanson said problems started cropping up almost immediately.

"School started last year on Sept. 11 (2006)," Swanson said. "Within two weeks you could pretty well tell that things weren't going very well. What you couldn't tell was why they weren't going well."

Since Lafayette is chartered through the Recovery School District, supply problems developed almost immediately as the RSD got off to a rocky start establishing its own centralized supply chain separate from the Orleans Parish School Board.

But other more alarming problems soon surfaced that could not be linked to external sources, Swanson said.

"Mosaica had made no progress at all on setting up a transportation system, which we were obligated to have by virtue of our charter," Swanson said. "We actually sent a letter over to Mosaica at about the 10-day point saying that this wasn't exactly what we signed on for. We expected them to run a first-class school, and it wasn't going very well."

Representatives of Mosaica could not be reached for comment.

Swanson said problems persisted as the school year went on, but it was hard to separate growing pains associated with a new school from catastrophic failures of the school's management company.

By November the Choice Foundation informed Mosaica it was in breach of contract and threatened to terminate the deal if the school wasn't properly managed.

Swanson said Mosaica took steps to improve conditions, but those measures ultimately proved ineffective and the contract was terminated in April.

Swanson and Choice board chairman Jim Huger immediately began moving management of the school in-house, initiating a nationwide search for a new head of school.

Swanson said Landry immediately rose to the top of the list.

A Ninth Ward native, Landry taught at Carver High School before running Christ Episcopal School in Covington and then the Colorado Springs School in Colorado.

"We probably had 10 or so people who we'd contacted about the job Landry had done at other schools, and everybody at each of the schools said he's just a remarkable leader and he did an incredible job of taking a school that was quite dysfunctional when he arrived and within two or three

years he had changed it completely," Swanson said.

Under Landry's guidance, the school has a new paint job, new flooring and a full compliment of textbooks and supplies.

Two teachers are assigned to each fourth-grade class to ensure every student receives extra help, assistant head of school Robert Bell said.

"Everything now is aligned to state stan-

dards," Bell said. "With the old curriculum we didn't even use textbooks. Now we follow the Louisiana Core Curriculum, which is geared to prepare students for the LEAP test. Since our management is now in-house, the curriculum is more tailored to what we need."

Kindergarten teacher Cheryl Winslow said she has already seen a major improvement in the school.

"The biggest difference is now we have leadership at the top," Winslow said. "Mickey definitely supports us, and that makes a big difference. The faculty is excited, the students are excited and even the parents are getting excited. When that happens, you've got something special going on."

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