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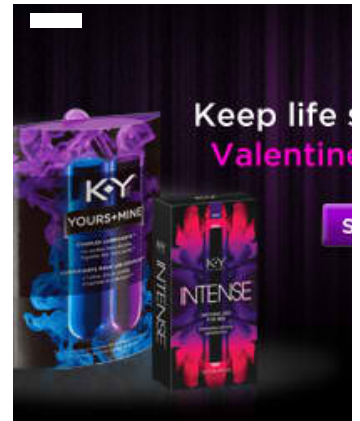
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# Apertures Wide Open: Student photographs on display at City Hall reflect the public schools' uneven progress

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By Darren Simon Follow

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Seven year-old Maya McKnight signs the New Orleans Student Bill of Rights as sister Arieana waits for her turn at "Through the Youth Lens," a photographic exhibit on display in the City Hall Rotunda from June 2 to July 31, 2009. Local students were given cameras to document the positive -- and negative -- aspects of their schools, and wrote a Bill of Rights for students in New Orleans schools after reviewing their pictures.

They are telling their stories through photographs.

In one image, students are shown sleeping in class; another captures a flooded, post-Katrina band room with rusted chairs. A pint-sized child is pictured standing next to a metal detector in an elementary school while, in another snapshot, a teacher looks ahead in a focused gaze.

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Since the spring of 2008, several New Orleans public school children have documented the conditions of their campuses in a project called Through the Youth Lens. The students, ages 8 to 20, took pictures of what caught their attention as they went about their everyday lives in public education.

"It was very eye-opening, " said Julie Cao, a student at Abramson Science and Technology Charter School.

An exhibit, featuring 24 photographs of the hundreds of images students took during the project, opened Tuesday on the first and second floors of City Hall and will run through July 31.

The project is a collaboration involving Critical Exposure, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit, and several New Orleans youth organizations including Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools, the Fyre Youth Squad and the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans.

Critical Exposure has organized photography projects with students in cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia. The organization helps students and groups advocate for excellence and equity in public education.

Inequities among the city's public schools were spotlighted in many of the students' photographs: Many classrooms that flooded after the storm have been refurbished while some remain barely touched.

While FEMA trailers are becoming a thing of the past in post-Katrina New Orleans, some students still attend classes in modular buildings.

One of Julie Cao's pictures is titled "The Separation of Education." It shows a modular building behind a tall chain-link fence.

A projected \$2 billion school rebuilding master plan will alter the landscape of the city's public school campuses. Some 30 schools are slated to be rebuilt or renovated in the first phase of the multiyear plan, which will cost an estimated \$700 million. Many of the construction projects in the first phase will allow students to be moved out of modular buildings and into traditional classroom settings.

Reflected in many of the photographs is a "A Student Bill of Rights, " which was written by the participants as part of the project and is included in the exhibit. The students list amendments that spell out entitlement to a quality education, good teachers and a chance to speak out about policies and enrichment programs.

"Those are things we should have, that we shouldn't have to ask for, " said Vernard Carter, a student at New Orleans Charter Science and Math High.

"A Lesson Once Taught" is the title of Briante Brumfield's image of a social studies homeroom at Colton School where on Aug. 26, 2005, three days before Hurricane Katrina struck the city, students were being asked to define a hurricane and name the bodies of water south and north of Louisiana.

"I always liked how photography spoke to me, " said Brumfield, 16, a student at Thurgood Marshall Early College High School, who wants to be a photographer.






Broderick Webb, a filmmaker and the project's co-director, said that through photojournalism, the students have sharpened their critical thinking and literacy skills and have evolved into better listeners.

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The T-P should start showing these pictures (all of them) 2 - 3 a day to show the status of education as shown from the students' views. Hundreds taken but view shown. The haunting "Like a Garden that Never Happened" speaks multitudes about education and the children who have not received it for generations.

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