CHALMETTE, La. -- When teachers in St. Bernard Parish moved into their tiny white FEMA trailers -- they call them "tin candominiums" -- across the street from Chalmette High School last fall, superintendent Doris Voitier couldn't give them a gas station, a grocery store, a post office or a pharmacy. Hurricane Katrina had wiped those out, along with their homes.

But Voitier realized she could save them the hour-long round-trip drive across New Orleans to do their laundry. So she towed an idle trailer across the street and installed half a dozen washers and dryers. That's how the parish's first post-Katrina laundromat was born.

It's a small but telling example of how, after Katrina, the small parish school district just southeast of New Orleans evolved into a model of pugnacious bootstrap efficiency, fighting to open schools when little else functioned for miles around. Many locals say it became the unifying core of the community.

Now, nearly 11 months after the storm, the district faces what could be an
even tougher test as it struggles to rebuild in the face of another hurricane season, its finances stretched to the breaking point.

Trapped as the water climbed

Located in a low-lying peninsula between the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal and the river itself, St. Bernard was among the areas hit hardest. It saw much of the region's worst flooding. All 22 schools were severely damaged -- Chalmette High, where Voitier and hundreds of others sought refuge during the storm, got 8 feet of water, and its library lost 28,000 books.

They spent five days trapped on the school's second floor, without a rescuer or sign of life from the outside world. After flooding overcame neighborhoods, the crowd of 250 grew to about 1,500. "We were pulling them in through the windows," Voitier says.

She eventually hitched a ride up the Mississippi River on a private boat that dropped her off in Baton Rouge, where she began the task of helping families enroll their kids elsewhere.

Weeks later, as other devastated parishes aimed at reopening by January, Voitier hired her own cleanup and recovery crew and began restoring
Chalmette -- now dubbed St. Bernard Unified School, to serve kindergartners through high-schoolers.

She readied the school's second floor but needed more classroom space. When FEMA told her portable classrooms couldn't be delivered until March, Voitier found her own.

"I said, 'The heck with y'all -- we'll do it ourselves, and we'll send you the bill.'"

She found 18 trailers in North Carolina and Georgia, paid $1.8 million in district funds and hauled them to a flat spot behind the football stadium.

On registration day, Voitier worried that few students would show up -- virtually all of the parish's 27,000 homes had been a total loss -- and expected 50, perhaps 100 kids.

She got 703.

"We found out the kids could come back to school, we immediately came back," says Elizabeth Ferguson, a mother of three whose family spent three months in Texas.
On the first day back, one first-grader greeted his best friend by saying, "I thought you were dead," recalls assistant superintendent Beverly Lawrason.

It was mid-November, two months before any New Orleans public schools would reopen. Most days kids stayed until 6 p.m., the school serving what was often their only hot meal of the day. The school year ended in May with 2,360 students on the district roster.

"We're the pioneers," preschool teacher JoAnn Serigne says. "We did the undoable -- we did the unthinkable."

Though Voitier had to lay off most of her staff, she paid them through the end of September -- and is continuing to cover their health insurance through the end of June.

Now, as school officials elsewhere look forward to opening in the fall, St. Bernard operates a widely subscribed summer enrichment and remediation program for kids throughout the parish.

"They have come together and said, 'We're going to start cleaning up our own mess, we're going to chart our own destiny,'" state Superintendent Cecil Picard said. "There's a bright spot in this dark cloud that's happened as a
result of the hurricane."

An equal-opportunity destroyer

He and others also say the storm brought together more than just the parish. It created new bonds between St. Bernard, a mostly white working-class suburb, and the adjacent Lower Ninth Ward, a mostly black, poor section of New Orleans.

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education pushed the two communities apart when many whites moved to St. Bernard and elsewhere to escape integration. But last August, both sections saw equal devastation.

What's more, many St. Bernard residents were among the first to act after the storm, well before state and federal rescuers arrived. They used fishing boats to pluck evacuees off roofs, not only in their neighborhoods but in the Lower Ninth as well.

"Katrina is one of those moments that literally tore away the veil," says Michael Sartisky, director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. "They realized they're all in it together."
On the first morning of summer school earlier this month, Serigne and her aides lead their 4- and 5-year-old pupils like ducklings from their air-conditioned portable classroom through a maze of passageways to the bright restored cafeteria, where they sit down for a hot breakfast.

Everyone eats, and this morning it's French toast, made from rectangular hot dog buns, washed down with milk. A few kids sit silently at their places, as if unsure what to do. Serigne exhorts, "Eat, baby."

Another hurricane season looms

As they dig in, a few matter-of-factly begin talking about the storm. One pigtailed girl says Katrina "washed away my birthday cake." Serigne explains that the child's birthday is in January, but the storm destroyed the bakery where she saw a cake she liked. "I tell the kids, 'If I find Katrina, I'm going to knock her out.'"

Now, as Voitier and her staff cross their fingers for this hurricane season, they worry about the parish's levees and puzzle about how to get both adequate insurance and money for construction, books and materials.

Donors showered St. Bernard with enough supplies to fill a spare classroom floor-to-ceiling and FEMA will cover 90% of rebuilding. But Voitier can't
financed the other 10% -- strict rules forbid using other relief money to make up the 10%.

"We're not asking for the moon here," she says. "All we're asking for is a little help to get us started again, and then we'll take care of the rest."

She says the rules sometimes border on comical: After she put together the laundromat -- a fire marshal had declared the trailer unfit for classroom use -- FEMA reported her for misusing federal property.

"Everything is such a fight," she says. "Everything takes so long, and we just don't have that much time to try to work through the federal bureaucracy."