Revisiting the Gulf Coast

After

Three years after the storm, school communities continue to rebuild.
One of the hardest-hit institutions was the educational system. Schools along the coastal regions of Louisiana and Mississippi were faced with more than just cleaning up their ravaged facilities. Entire districts were left without the resources needed to keep schools open.

In the days, weeks, and months following the hurricanes, schools cried out for help and the National Association of Elementary School Principals answered the call through its Principal-to-Principal Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund. Then, in 2006, during its 85th Annual Convention in San Antonio, NAESP presented the Louisiana Association of Principals and the Mississippi Association of Elementary School Administrators with a check for $70,000. After the convention, additional donations brought the total to $80,000. Additionally, Gulf Coast schools reported receiving contributions of textbooks, audio/visual materials, personal teaching materials and supplies, library books, and classroom and PE equipment.

According to Dawn Amy of Vermilion Parish School District in Louisiana, “Schools have returned to the business of education with a vision and a focus on student achievement, all with the help and support of many individuals, other schools, and national groups who have so generously given to those in need.”

In August 2005, the world witnessed one of the most destructive natural disasters on America’s mainland. Hurricane Katrina, followed a month later by Hurricane Rita, brought more than broken levees, flooded streets and homes, and destroyed businesses. It caused changes in the dynamics and the demographic and cultural make-up of the region. One of the most heart-wrenching images was the devastation of children’s sense of security and well-being. As one student from Estelle Elementary School in Marrero, Louisiana, put it, “Our parents wanted us to think it was okay, but we knew it wasn’t.”

St. Bernard Parish remained mostly desolate one year after the Hurricane Katrina disaster.
Here are some reflections from Louisiana and Mississippi school leaders on the effects of Katrina, and the ways they used the generous support they received.

If You Build It, They Will Come

St. Bernard Parish, which is a conservative, close-knit, family-oriented community located east of New Orleans, was wiped out within a 24-hour period following Hurricane Katrina. The public school system served 8,800 students and had been the largest employer in the community. Each of the 15 public school sites was severely damaged and, without extensive repair, would not be habitable for the rest of the school year—and some would not open for years to come. Immediately, all of the students were displaced and 1,200 teachers, administrators, and support staff were unemployed.

With the few resources it had left, the district planned to open a temporary school for between 50 and 100 students in the parking lot of one of the high schools—only to have more than 320 students registered on the first day. They included not only the children of returning refinery workers and first responders, but former students driving from temporary homes in all parts of southeast Louisiana. Children were desperate for some normalcy in their lives, and going to school in St. Bernard Parish, and seeing some of their friends for the first time in two months, represented at least a bit of normalcy.

In November, the school opened with 350 students, and by Christmas enrollment was at 653. More than 1,500 students arrived for the second semester, and by year’s end more than 2,300 students were attending St. Bernard Unified School. The following year, eight fully reconstructed schools opened to receive 4,690 students. Our goal was to bring home any student who wanted to be here, so we built them and they came—from each of

NAESP’s Volunteer Service Day in New Orleans

More than 100 convention attendees have signed up for NAESP’s Volunteer Service Day, which will take place April 2 during the Association’s 88th Annual Convention and Exposition in New Orleans. Volunteers will work at three school sites on projects that range from painting to landscaping to help their New Orleans colleagues prepare their schools to accept children in a clean and safe learning environment.

NAESP developed this service project to assist the New Orleans Public School system as it continues to recover from the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. The day is sure to start off NAESP’s convention on a high note, as camaraderie, compassion, and volunteerism will drive principals from all over the nation in this humanitarian effort.

Visit the convention Web site, accessible from www.naesp.org, for more updates about the schools that will be rehabilitated, the generous sponsors that are making this project possible, and other details about the day’s events.
the parish’s former public, private, and parochial schools. But it has not been an easy road.

Our funding levels through sales and property taxes are unpredictable because fewer businesses are operational and all homes were heavily damaged. Our state allotment has dramatically decreased as well. What has helped, however, have been the generous donations from our neighboring schools across the state, nation, and world. Books, instructional materials, furniture, and school supplies have arrived by the truckloads, and cash donations allowed us to buy what we needed to get started until the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) and our state and local governments were able to come to the rescue—which was often as long as a year later. Thanks to our neighbors, we were able to open schools, provide instruction, and even keep our children in an after-school program until 6 p.m. to help their parents have time to rebuild their lives.

We hope that no one will ever have to go through what we did. The images of destruction tell only half of the story, as no one has been able to photograph a broken heart. And so we continue on the very, very long journey ahead of us. But we are now of the mind-set that hard work, a can-do spirit, and encouragement from our neighbors across the nation will help us along the way. Also, we are indebted to the personnel of the Louisiana State Department of Education, who stood strongly by us in our greatest hour of need. We remain, in too many instances, homeless even though we are three years out from the storm.

Bev Lawrason
Assistant Superintendent
St. Bernard Parish Schools
Louisiana

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The True First Responders

The true first responders to the plight we found ourselves in after Hurricane Katrina were educators from around the United States and Canada. After evacuating and eventually returning to my school, one of the first things that I did was reach out to fellow principals on NAESP’s Web site. I first had to come to grips with asking for help for my students, their families, my staff, and myself. But after I swallowed my pride, NAESP made it easy to ask for assistance. In fact, as soon as I described our plight, offers of assistance started pouring in from across the nation.

The magnitude of the generosity shown to our school and others in the Greater New Orleans area was tremendous, and it continues today. Our friends from Foulk’s Ranch Elementary School in Elk Grove, California, visited us and delivered a tractor trailer full of clothing and household items for our students and staff who had lost their possessions in the dirty floodwaters that filled their homes. The Foulk’s Ranch school family, under the leadership of Principal Mary Beth Kroup, also made a long-term commitment to support the Estelle Elementary School family. They provided thousands of dollars to replace school supplies, library books, and equipment, and the schools exchanged staff for two consecutive years.

There were many others who also responded:

- The Jacob Road Elementary School in Chesterfield, Virginia, held a chili supper to raise money to provide gift cards for the Estelle staff whose homes had been destroyed.
- Cathy Radermacher, principal of Bellingham Elementary School in Bellingham, Minnesota, sent more than $500 to help families with school uniforms.
- Jennifer Herrick from Judd Elementary School in New Jersey raised countless dollars for school supplies and coordinated a clothing drive.
- Marcy Aycock, principal of Kennedy Elementary School in Wellington, Kansas, and a former NAESP State
Representative, supported our school during this hard time.

- The Washington International School, through the efforts of Tina Thuermer and Kate Meean-Waugh, extended its assistance to our school and others.
- Pam DeMarco, principal of the Monetville Public School in Monetville, Ontario, Canada, sent shoeboxes that were decorated and filled with storybooks and small toys to help take our students’ minds off of losing their own rooms with their favorite toys.

Early donations ranged from gift cards, checks, book bags, school supplies, library books, household essentials, bedding, cleaning products, toiletries, clothing, and shoes to kind words and much encouragement. As the seasons changed, and Halloween, Christmas, and Easter passed, schools across the country sent us cards and candy and more good wishes. Mrs. Jaeger, a first-year, first-grade teacher in Washburn, North Dakota, made a book with her class picture on the front that was filled with pages of pen pal letters from her class during the Christmas season.

There are many others who offered their support during the worst natural disaster to hit our nation. Thank you to all of the wonderful schoolchildren, their parents, school staff, teachers, and administrators from around our great country, and especially the leadership of NAESP for not forgetting us during these difficult years in our post-Katrina landscape. School people are the best. They have the heart and spirit of caring and renewal.

Jackie H. Daniilidis
Principal
Estelle Elementary School
Marrero, Louisiana

A Healthy Rebirth

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has undergone a post-Katrina shift in population from dramatic declines to astounding increases, and this has had major implications for our area schools.

NAESP/MAESA presented the Bay St. Louis School District with $41,000 after Hurricane Katrina. This money was divided among the elementary schools in the district to continue programs that were in place prior to the storm.

Harrison County School District lost 2,500 students after Hurricane Katrina, but the district has since experienced an influx of new students. Now at full enrollment with 13,225 students, the school district is experiencing overcrowding in some schools and is presently building two new high schools.

In addition to the increase in population, the district’s schools are now experiencing an increase in diversity and the roles of the principal and classroom teachers have evolved to accommodate these changes. Principals need to take a holistic view in maintaining sensitivity to students’ emotional and physical needs. They also must be prepared to serve as shelter managers and as liaisons with the Red Cross and other service organizations.