

POLICY BRIEF

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Learning from Hurricanes to Plan for the Aftermath of COVID-19

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“Our kids came to us even after the storm because it was their sense of normalcy. They were taken care of here.” – teacher

After a disaster hits, schools must manage recovery efforts that consider the needs of their students, staff, facilities, and communities. Disaster recovery requires assessing damage and being creative to address difficult situations when resources are limited.

A research team from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Gibson Consulting Group conducted interviews and surveys in school districts recovering from Hurricane Matthew and Hurricane Harvey. Through this data collection, researchers identified common challenges facing schools during disaster recovery, as well as promising practices to mitigate these challenges.

Issues and Promising Practices

Hurricanes Matthew and Harvey created immediate and long-term disruptions to life. Students and staff experienced personal loss ranging from minor damage to total loss of home. The impacts on school facilities ranged from minor flooding to total loss of building and supplies. Some schools, undamaged by the storm, experienced displacement challenges as they took in students and teachers from other campuses.

Interview participants recommended that school and district personnel should adhere to the following:

- **Return to a familiar routine quickly.** Participants described that routines provide a sense of normalcy during a period of displacement and disruption for both students and staff.

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- **Accepting aid requires vulnerability.** Participants recommended that educators should be open about personal experiences when requesting and receiving aid. Through this process of openness, individuals will be more transparent, honest, and comfortable when talking about specific school and district needs.

In Their Words	Lessons Learned
<p>“[Teachers] are having to miss more work than they normally would have, which affects the instructional time and affects their days off and affects their ability to deliver instruction.”</p> <p>- District personnel</p>	<p>Instructional time was lost due to school closures, a presence of social-emotional and physical needs, students and staff absences, and other disruptions. Participants expressed a need for administrators to acknowledge the personal recovery efforts that must take place outside school.</p> <p>Overall recommendations encouraged administrators to focus on the following after school reopen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide teachers with recommendations on how to compress the required curriculum or prioritize content. - Reconsider what is required from students and staff (e.g., relax dress code, reduce homework, and overlook absences).
<p>“The mental piece, the stress of it, trying to come to school, losing everything that you possibly may have had.... It takes them out of their comfort zone.”</p> <p>- Principal</p>	<p>Mental health and social-emotional needs took a new prominence after the storm. Interview findings highlighted weather-related anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm, exhaustion, and survivor’s guilt.</p> <p>Participants recommended that administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure that appropriate counseling services are available for both students and staff. - Be responsive to evolving issues that may persist in the days, months, and years of recovery. Participants indicated that there is a need for short- and long-term support services following a storm.
<p>“[Staff] were dealing with things on their own personal end and our administration was understanding of that. You can’t care for others if you’re not on point with your game.”</p> <p>- District Personnel</p>	<p>Findings revealed that participants depended on the support provided to them by colleagues and administrators as they dealt with personal recovery as well as increased work demands.</p> <p>To promote a supportive school culture, participants recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote and encourage staff collaboration. - Be flexible with time off. Staff need the ability to leave for meetings about home repair, etc. while continuing to do their job. - Ensure staff continues to be paid during the disaster. Continual payment is vital for participants’ morale and personal recovery.

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<p>“There are resources out there. Don’t be scared to ask for what you need for your kids.”</p>	<p>During a disaster, communication is essential, but there are more opportunities for communication to break down. Interviewed participants expressed an interest in receiving communication immediately after the storm from local, state, and federal agencies regarding information on school calendars, testing, access to resources, and insurance.</p>
<p>- Teacher</p>	<p>Additionally, participants recommended that all educators overall should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Use a variety of tools to communicate with people (e.g., some outlets are checked by parents more regularly than others).- Ensure that messaging is consistent across organizations and personnel in order to reduce confusion.- Know what needs exist at your school(s). Participants reported that communicating needs to districts, state agencies, and community groups is critical.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Being hit by a hurricane creates many challenges. Schools must balance repairing facilities and estimating damages to equipment while supporting students and staff through a traumatic event. During the recovery process, schools should aim to provide a routine that enables students and staff to have a sense of normalcy. Policymakers at the state and district levels can support educators' return to normalcy by ensuring that schools are aware of resources available to aid recovery efforts. Additionally:

1. Policymakers could **waive requirements** for testing or announce decisions about testing requirements by the time schools reopen.
2. Policymakers could **increase the availability of mental health resources** to schools in the immediate aftermath of the storm and in the months of recovery.
3. Districts can **adopt a flexible leave policy** to support staff who are managing personal recovery efforts and taking on increased demands at work.
4. Policymakers at all levels should **be in continual communication** during the recovery process so they are able to address evolving issues and present a consistent message to the public.

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