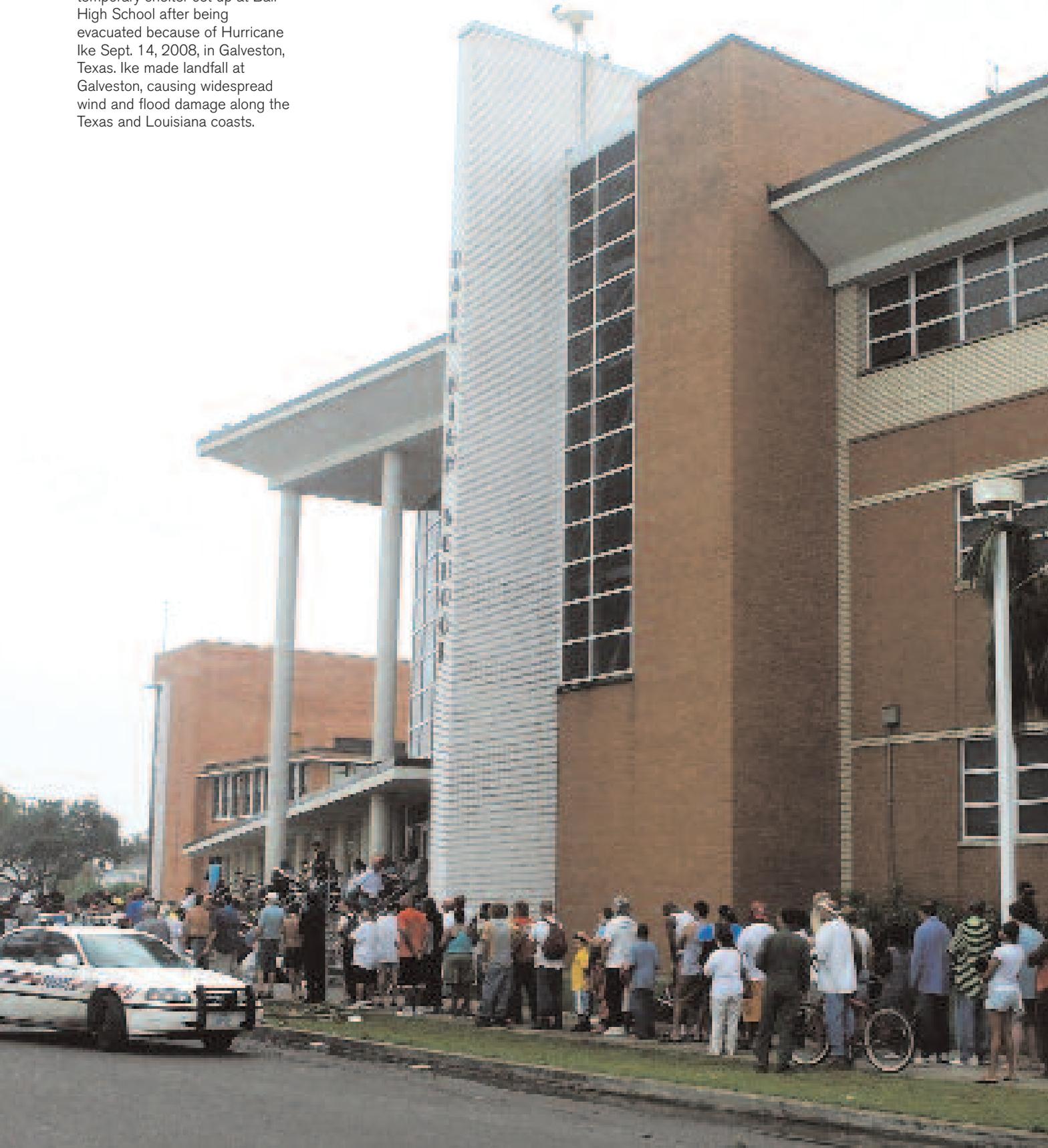


People wait in line for food at a temporary shelter set up at Ball High School after being evacuated because of Hurricane Ike Sept. 14, 2008, in Galveston, Texas. Ike made landfall at Galveston, causing widespread wind and flood damage along the Texas and Louisiana coasts.





Lawrence Hardy

Starting Over

After a devastating storm strikes the Texas Gulf Coast, schools seek a return to 'normal'

Susana Flores was 12 days into her first year of teaching when the call came to evacuate. It was a Wednesday night, and staff members at Ball High School in Galveston, Texas, were expecting to report for a half day's work the next day. But officials at the district office, mindful of the traffic jams that snarled the flight from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita three years earlier, weren't taking any chances.

"They decided, 'Just forget it,'" Flores says, recalling the automated call she received that evening—three days before Hurricane Ike struck the Texas coast. "You're not coming back. Get out of here."

Those weren't the exact words, of course, but that was the message. A school year that began so promisingly—with the 23-year-old biology teacher working 12-hour days (and loving it), planning for the semester, and looking forward to learning from her peers—was halted.

Disasters come in many forms, both natural and manmade, but school districts that are prepared for the worst are better able to get back up and running in the aftermath. Preparedness plans help district leaders coordinate when schools should close, how to communicate to staff and parents, and thousands of other details big and small.

Hurricanes are among the most dreaded natural disasters, and after Hurricane Katrina, the fears of those living along the Gulf Coast are heightened. But schools can take steps to restore order and resume operations after such an event.

Amid the devastation of Hurricane Ike, Galveston opened schools on Oct. 7, just three weeks after the storm made landfall. More than 60 percent of the 7,600 students showed up—a relatively large turnout considering the tremendous upheaval the district and

community had suffered. Teachers and principals helped students deal with the aftermath of the storm, rather than on start right in on academics.

"Actually, I think it went very well," board President Andrew Mytelka says of the day classes resumed. "All the kids and teachers were excited to be back."

Ike's path

On Sept. 13, Hurricane Ike struck the Texas and Louisiana coastlines as a Category 2 storm with winds of up to 110 miles per hour. As of Sept. 30, at least 35 people were dead in the Houston area alone, and damages were estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Public schools were hit hard. About 200 districts were closed for anywhere for one day to a month in the Houston/Galveston area alone, and at least 600,000 students were affected. Although Houston schools were not hit as hard as those on the coast, 20 percent were still closed two weeks after Ike made landfall. And as the storm left Texas and moved north through the Midwest, widespread power outages shuttered hundreds of schools in places such as Louisville, Ky., Cincinnati, Columbus, Ohio, and Pittsburgh.

Galveston and the small, rural Anahuac Independent School District across Trinity Bay to the north were among the worst hit.

The devastation on Galveston Island was widely reported in newspapers and on television. The district sustained significant damage to several of its buildings, but the schools in the city and in the peninsula to the north held up relatively well considering the storm's ferocity.

"Bolivar Peninsula was pretty much wiped off the map," says Dyann Polzin, Galveston's executive director for human relations and student services. "But our campus there is only two years old; it did really well."

Polzin was referring to Crenshaw Elementary and

Middle School, which serves preschool through eighth-grade and sits atop huge concrete pilings. But other schools on the island sustained as much as \$5 million in damages, and cleanup efforts alone were expected to run into the millions of dollars. Polzin said a few weeks after the storm that it was too early to tell which schools could be repaired and which ones would have to be demolished.

Galveston is, in the parlance of the state legislature's equalization plan, a "Robin Hood" or high-wealth district. Before the storm it was expected to send \$11 million back to the state to be distributed to poorer districts. "Of course, that will all change," Polzin says.

Just how much the district's insurance would cover—or how much the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would kick in—were unknowns in the weeks following the storm, district officials say. Like many businesses and homeowners, the district was better insured for wind damage than flooding, says board president Mytelka.

He said the district's disaster plan worked about as well as could be expected, given the unpredictable nature of Gulf Coast hurricanes.

"The preparation worked fine," Mytelka says. "No one had a recovery plan because you really don't know what to expect."

A Guide on Crisis Planning

The word "crisis" comes from a Greek word meaning "decision," notes a U.S. Department of Education guide to crisis planning for schools. Of course, school districts make decisions all the time. But in a crisis, school and district leaders may be called on to make critical choices under extreme stress and with limited time, resources, and information.

Preparation and constant reassessment are essential, the report says. All districts and schools should have crisis management teams and crisis plans that reflect their specific needs.

"Each community has its own history, culture, and way of doing business," the report says. "Schools and districts are at risk for different types of crises and have their own definitions of what constitutes a crisis. Crisis plans need to be customized to communities, districts, and schools to meet the unique needs of local residents and students."

A school crisis can be anything from a natural disaster (such as a fire, hurricane, or tornado) to a man-made incident (such as a bomb threat or school shooting).

The report covers four aspects of a process that should be continually reviewed and revised. These are mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

For more information, see *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, a publication of Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. It can be found online at www.ed.gov.

Beyond buildings

Repairing buildings is a large part of a district's disaster recovery efforts. Other factors are important to recovery, such as finding places for teachers and staff to live in affected areas, arranging for child care for faculty and staff, reassigning children to non-affected schools, and looking for ways to replace a fleet of buses wiped out by the storm surge.

The district moved quickly to establish a day-care center for returning staff members with young children. "That was the number one issue—after, of course, housing—that employees dealt with," Polzin says.

In the days after the hurricane, the far-flung faculty of Ball High School and other Galveston district employees communicated via a district blog. "I'm in Austin with my zoo," wrote Flores. "That's right: a dog, two cats, two birds, and I would have taken my lizard, but she is in my classroom."

"I'm in Los Angeles safe and CRAZY," wrote another staffer. "I've heard so much but still nothing definite about my home." Says another: "I'm keeping GISD and my Ball family in my prayers."

Right before school was to open, Flores was still in Austin, having trouble finding permanent housing on Galveston Island. Her apartment was not as damaged as many, but it was uninhabitable. It had flooded with eight inches of water, and a tree had crashed through the roof.

"Everyone and their grandmother are looking for a place to stay," Flores says.

During the first weeks of class, the district relaxed the school uniform policy and asked students to fill out forms to see if they needed school supplies, clothing, or counseling. Also during the first two weeks of school, all students received free breakfast and lunch.

Houston loaned 50 buses to Galveston, and the district reworked bus routes to include stops at the Red Cross shelter and at seawall hotels, where many families were staying.

A curriculum developed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will be used with students, including activities to help children see the hurricane as a learning experience.

It was, of course, a learning experience for board members and administrators as well. Asked what he learned from the experience, Mytelka replied: "Start early, and stick to the plan."

A school district "has a lot of moving parts" that must work together, both in normal times and in emergencies, Mytelka says. Add to this the necessity of working with municipal governments and other agencies, and the process becomes more complex still.

"Everyone wants to get to the same place," Mytelka says. They just have different ideas about how to get there.

Looking to the future

With its students dispersed throughout Texas and neighboring states, Galveston officials have no way of knowing what the future enrollment will be. That will mean tough decisions con-

cerning which campuses to close and which to keep open in the long run, Mytelka says.

The salaries of all returning staff members were guaranteed through the end of the 2008-09 school year, but how large that staff will be next year also is unknown.

For districts that have taken in evacuees, Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott has waived the required 22-to-1 student-teacher ratio for kindergarten through fifth grade, spokeswoman Suzanne Marchman says.

And districts that see their enrollment grow by 50 students or more as a result of the evacuation will have their state allocation adjusted accordingly.

Mytelka's life, like so many others in the Greater Houston area, was also upended. "I lost half my house," he says, but quickly adds: "No matter how bad it is, it's worse for someone else."

Still, he laments the short attention span of the public nationwide, which turned its attention from the Gulf Coast to the next crises—the implosion on Wall Street and the presidential election. "The problem on the national level is, we were yesterday's news," he says. "But we still have today's problems."

Meanwhile, Mytelka, an attorney, must deal with the district's myriad short-and long-term problems while rebuilding his house and his business. "This is a hell of a volunteer job," he says.

'Pretty much flattened'

Anahuac ISD is a 1,350-student district made up of five small communities, among them Smith Point and Oak Island.

"If you've been watching the news, you know that Smith Point and Oak Island were pretty much flattened," says Superintendent Linda Barnhart.

Barnhart and her husband rode out the storm in a classroom in the district's middle school, a "designated shelter of last resort." That building held up well against the storm, but the district suffered big losses elsewhere.

Half the roof of the high school gym was blown off, leaving the wood court to buckle in Ike's torrential rains. "It looks like we had some kind of skateboard contest in there," Barnhart says.

The high school library and band hall also were heavily damaged. Musical instruments that could be salvaged were moved to the middle school band room, but replacement costs for the rest are expected to be about \$185,000.

Of the district's 200 staff members, 30 had homes that were severely damaged. Still, when school reopened on Sept. 26, 96 percent of the staff returned—a showing that impressed Barnhart.

"We are on the road to recovery!" the school's website proclaimed after the successful reopening. Barnhart was especially thankful for the work of custodians and maintenance workers, many of whom worked long hours on the district's hard-hit

facilities even while their own homes were severely damaged.

But everyone did his or her part to follow the disaster plan, including librarians who sorted through damaged books in the high school library; band directors, who helped salvage instruments; and coaches, who organized crews of athletes to help with the cleanup.

The theme of this school year is making the most of "the dash" that appears between the endpoints of one's own life, namely, birth and death. With the challenges ahead, "we have the perfect opportunity to make our dash count," Barnhart says. "We can show strength. We can show perseverance. We can show strength and compassion."

At nearby Barbers Hill Independent School District, which has about 4,000 students, three of eight major buildings sustained significant damage, says Superintendent Greg Poole. He estimated the damage at about \$10 million.

Despite the damage, Barbers Hill was closed for just nine school days. Poole says resuming the school year as quickly as possible was critical because "if you miss school for a month, kids are going to leave."

On Sept. 30, Commissioner Scott said that districts affected by the hurricane could shorten their school year by up to 10 days. He urged the districts to make up the any additional days either by shortening the December break or by adding days onto the end of the school year.

"Making up instruction is really what he's stressing so students don't fall behind on the [state] tests" or find themselves unprepared for next school year, Marchman says. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) tests are given in the spring.

Making up instructional time is one thing; reviving the spirit schools had at the start of the year is another. The 45,000-student Alief Independent School District near Houston was spared the brunt of Hurricane Ike. But after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 the district absorbed close to 6,000 children from neighboring Mississippi and Louisiana, several hundred of whom have moved to Alief permanently.

The district was ready for Hurricane Ike and the impact it could have on those students displaced earlier. "We're going to have to deal with the emotional trauma with Katrina kids," says school board member Sarah Winkler.

Another less dramatic, but equally essential component of the district's disaster planning included setting up a multilayered system for storing records off-site.

"There's multiple, multiple backups," Winkler says.

Another 2005 storm, Hurricane Rita, closed Alief for several days, and when the district finally opened, it was "like you're starting school all over again," Winkler says.

"That year never seemed normal," she says. "And this year—I'm afraid it's going to be a return to that." ■

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