

Post-Katrina Fixes Really Drive Home Our Humanity

Beneath an American flag is a plaque, embedded in the asphalt, testifying to the ties forged between kids and firefighters and to what they'd both been through.

By Lawrence Hardy

From *American School Board Journal*

HER office already had been broken into, so keys weren't necessary. Pushing in the door, Kim Stasny, superintendent of the Bay St. Louis-Waveland School District, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, waded through the muck, thick and sticky and infused with a grotesque smell she will never forget.

Shell-shocked squatters already were huddled in the nearby Second

Street Elementary School, the historic gem of Mississippi's Bay St. Louis-Waveland School District. The school was inundated with the same smelly mud that had invaded the administration building next door. It will never function as a school again.

Watching it all was an exhausted police officer, barefoot and sitting in her patrol car. She had broken into Stasny's office to find keys to

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the elementary school. She had searched the squatters' belongings and confiscated one shotgun.

Stasny kept a diary of events following Hurricane Katrina. Here are three excerpts, the first from Day 1:

"As we departed [the ruined Second Street Elementary School] I saw one of our buses go by. A scruffy man with long hair that I had never seen before drove it. Two things struck me as strange: How had he managed to start one of the school buses when it had been submerged in floodwaters? And, Where was he going? I never learned how some clever individual had gotten the engine running, but I did find out that it was being used to pick up homeless citizens who did not have the strength to walk to the [school] cafeteria."

Like Hollywood Blvd. on TV

A second entry of Stasny's reads, "Even at this early date the high school was overrun with people looking for shelter. Each cuddled their meager belongings in much the same way that we see the homeless people on Hollywood Boulevard do in a television show. They slept on gym bleachers and auditorium chairs. These were not street urchins or people who normally lived under bridges, but normal folks who had owned homes or paid rent just a couple of days ago."

A third entry reads, "On the [passenger] seat to my right was a plas-

tic tub. It was the new Central Office filing vault. In it I kept every note I made and every scrap of paper that I scrounged from the rubble. Folders inside were my attempt to organize things, but they slid around as I drove, and I often opened the lid to see what I could only call a 'document collage.'"

The Courage to Get Back

This was the scene in part of Bay St. Louis on August 31, 2005, two days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. In the weeks that followed, Stasny and her staff found themselves struggling to rebuild a school system in a surreal world where nothing resembled what it had once been and the most basic services—water, electricity, telephone, and cell phone service—were absent.

In this once quaint and vibrant town, the days following the storm were sweltering, the nights shrouded in silence and utter darkness. "And everywhere you went," says Stasny, "there was that smell."

For Bay St. Louis and other stricken districts, the routines of school would never be the same. And yet, from the moment Katrina left the shattered Gulf Coast, there was a determined effort to get back to normal—whatever "normal" meant in the context of one of the most devastating natural disasters in American history.

"There was a huge emphasis in Mississippi among superintendents

to get kids back to school as quickly as possible," says Mike Ward, professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Today the challenge is to build on that beginning, as students return for the first full year of school after Katrina. Districts along the Gulf Coast, however, continue to face logistical and financial problems: depleted local tax bases, skyrocketing insurance costs, and the continuing effort to redefine their missions amid massive changes in student body and staff.

Focus on FEMA, Not Kids

Administrators along the Gulf Coast say they want a more normal school year—even a "boring" one, in the words of one Alabama principal. But Katrina continues to have a huge impact on their day-to-day jobs.

Stasny expresses frustration over insurance issues and the "red tape" needs of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) before she can rebuild damaged schools. "I'm just so far from the classroom and instruction," she says. "It's almost like I don't even focus on the kids being in school anymore because I'm so focused on gathering data. Meetings. Meetings. Meetings!"

But an even larger problem looms in the future as districts confront the twin problems of enrollment declines and reduced tax base.

"And damage to real property on the Gulf Coast is huge," Ward says.

Bay St. Louis had 2,380 students before Katrina and lost nearly 1,000 of them to other districts. It helps that the state is permitting affected districts to base enrollment projections on pre-Katrina numbers (Bay St. Louis is budgeting for an 80% return) in 2006-07, but the reality of a reduced student population will be felt in future years.

In addition, the district had benefited from Bay St. Louis' seaside casino and vibrant commercial district, but both were severely damaged by the storm. This year, property tax revenue is expected to be down by as much as 50%.

To survive this past year, the district has drawn from a \$10-million Mississippi Development Authority bond it took out in November. It also was aided, at least financially, by the departure of 59 teachers and aides—18% of its total instructional force. That saved \$1.6 million in salaries and benefits.

The district has qualified for a Community Disaster Loan that will pay out about \$1 million toward this year's operating expenses, but it still expects to be as much as \$1 million short. And insurance costs are also a problem for Bay St. Louis and other districts along the coast.

"I just talked to a superintendent" from a medium-sized district, says Steve Williams, assistant to Mississippi's state superintendent. "Their insurance is going up

half a million dollars next year.”

Ward and his colleagues at the University of Southern Mississippi recently surveyed 250 Mississippi administrators: 90% said student and staff homelessness was a moderate to severe problem. “I had one homeless child in my system last year,” one administrator told Ward’s group. “This year I have 800.”

“In This Together”

Horror stories prompted by Katrina are just as horrible in Alabama, where James Gill, the principal of Alba Middle School, and his staff made certain that all the children of the school received gift bags of school supplies, whether they were homeless or not. Gill and his staff wanted it that way. It was Alba Middle School’s way of saying, “This isn’t charity; we’re in this together.”

Still, some families were clearly worse off than other families were. Before the storm hit Alba, which is located in the small fishing town of Bayou La Batre, Alabama, nearly 70% of the school’s population was receiving free and reduced-price lunch. Afterward, almost half its 580 students were homeless.

Several times after the storm, a student approached school counselor Angela Rodgers and asked quietly about the clothes closet she was stocking with shoes, shirts, underwear, and other items. “Miss Rodgers,” the student said, “do you have any more pants?”

Many of these students are im-

migrants from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia whose families saved for years to buy shrimp trawlers. After Katrina, a quarter of that fleet was lost.

Gill had been Alba’s principal just seven weeks when the hurricane struck. He had come from another middle school in the 65,000-student Mobile County Public Schools System. He remembers the day he and his Assistant Principal Wade Whitney, Jr., drove to the school after the storm, recalling that “When we pulled up to the parking lot, everything looked OK.”

Just Keeps Coming

It wasn’t. Up to four feet of water had inundated the school, ruining library books, lockers, band instruments, and school supplies. Gill and Whitney tried to remove the half foot of standing water that remained in the halls, but “as fast as we would push water out, more water would come out of the lockers and the walls.”

From the beginning of their efforts, they emphasized getting the school up and running as soon as possible. They were able to do it in eight days: “It’s the center of the community,” Gill says. “If this school goes away, this community just dies.”

Eight months after the storm, the school that won a state beautification award two years ago looks more like its old self. Hanging baskets are back on the outside walk-

ways. The photography studio, which had documented Bayou La Batre's experiences in a touring show called "Eyes of the Storm," is a center of activity once again. And the aquaculture lab, where students learn the science of fish farming, is in full use.

Gill even allows himself a good-natured boast about some of his school's athletic and academic accomplishments. Alba was second in the state in archery in 2005 (they'll take first next time, he assures a visitor) and finished in the top quarter of middle schools on most districtwide tests.

Never Stopping

He repeatedly praises his staff—the teachers, the administration, the custodians—saying that there was never a point where they stopped while they were working during the reconstruction. The band director found herself practicing in a cramped and very noisy trailer.

"I know she had to have a headache when she went out of there," Gill says. "But she never missed a beat."

One thing he finds unsettling is another hurricane season, which is in full swing as school resumes. There was strange weather in the Gulf this spring. Water temperatures were several degrees above normal, and warm water is more conducive to hurricanes. Fish not usually caught until mid-summer—

grouper, trigger fish, Spanish mackerel—have been coming closer to shore, representing another sign of an unsettled Gulf.

Of course, Gill is not the only one who is showing concern about the weather. Students who have spent their entire lives by the water now are afraid of ordinary thunderstorms. "Every time it rains," one girl says, "I have to think that it's closer."

Two days before the hurricane, Stasny and her staff, in Mississippi, met at the administration building to review storm procedures:

"Take in the swings at the elementary schools. Close the office blinds. Store student records in school vaults and fireproof cabinets. Unplug the computers, and cover the monitors with garbage bags."

These were some of the normal steps which were being taken for a district which had been used to weathering violent storms. Looking back on the situation, in retrospect, they were woefully inadequate.

"We lost every computer we had. Switchers, routers—you name it, we lost it," says network administrator Wayne Purl.

Window blinds and garbage bags might offer protection against rain and flying glass, but they can't stop a storm surge of 27 feet. When Katrina struck in the early morning blackness, it blew out the windows in the district office, virtually de-

molished the district's three elementary schools, and leveled its alternative school.

"We were truly excited about this year, and in one day it was completely erased," says Donna Torres, director of federal programs. "Everything we were excited about, everything that was going to happen this year was totally erased."

Schools in a Box

There has been progress. The matrix of air-conditioned Quonset huts that serve as the district offices have a more permanent feel than the cramped space administrators used after the storm—and that still stores leftover Schools in a Box, classroom relief supplies that UNICEF typically sends to Third World countries. By early June, the district had nearly 300 computers, fewer than half the number before the storm but enough for every classroom.


Offers of aid came in throughout the year. By late June, the amount totaled more than \$800,000, including \$300,000 from the community of Scarsdale, New York, which has adopted Bay St. Louis and Waveland. Students from Jefferson City, Missouri, held a walkathon, taking pledges to walk around their track a distance equivalent to the miles between their city and the Gulf Coast school district. A teacher in Japan sent a set of origami cranes, symbols of good luck.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Jackie Wintruba's third-grade class at North Bay Elementary School began writing to firefighters in Elizabeth, New Jersey, who had responded to the attack. They sent the firefighters letters in a homemade mailbox and kept writing them throughout the year.

After Katrina, one of the firefighters who had been a part of that group called and asked what the children needed. Like the district's other two elementary schools, North Bay was operating in Quonset huts a few hundred yards from its ruined building.

Wintruba recalled the conversation as it had taken place: "What do you need?" "We need a playground." "He said, 'We'll have one there.'"

Twenty-one firefighters used their vacation time in order to come to Bay St. Louis. When they had finished the actual playground itself, they found that they had some days leftover. Given that extra time, they added a basketball court as well.

Among the playground toys which were provided is a small fire engine with a working bell that Wintruba says the children love to ring. An American flag flies in the breeze most days, and beneath that flag is a plaque which is embedded in the asphalt, a testament to the ties forged between children and firefighters, and to what they had both been through. 

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TITLE: Post-Katrina Fixes Really Drive Home Our Humanity
SOURCE: Educ Dig 72 no3 N 2006
WN: 0630503474001

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