



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (CNMI-AL)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

This is Not a Drill: Education-Related Response and Recovery in the Wake of Natural Disasters

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, June 5, 2019 | 9:00 a.m.

Today, we are here to examine the federal government's response to school communities impacted by natural disasters and the diverse challenges our schools face on the road to recovery. We need to know what has gone right, what has gone wrong, and what needs to improve for the sake of our children and their schools. Because we do know that it is a question of when, not if, the next storm will hit.

Our distinguished witnesses will share their harrowing experiences rebuilding communities in the wake of some of our country's most devastating and recent natural disasters. We also have an opportunity to hear directly from the Education Department about their role in helping these communities recover.

Just last October, Super Typhoon Yutu devastated my own district, the Northern Mariana Islands. Unfortunately, despite being the most powerful storm in the world that year and the worst American storm since 1935, Yutu received minimal media coverage and or even mentions in the President's twitter feed unlike other storms did. However, I do appreciate Secretary DeVos' phone call to me just days after Yutu with a pledge of support for Marianas schools, teachers, and students.

Secretary DeVos' followed through on her pledge by releasing \$1.1 million in Project SERV grant funds in January for the Marianas Public School System. But our students will need much more federal support to restore proper school facilities for the over 900 Hopwood Middle School students whose campus was totally destroyed by Yutu and are still learning in FEMA-built tents.

Despite many families being displaced and even losing their homes, I am inspired by the strength and resilience of our students. Their perseverance is reflected in the 900 high school seniors will receive their diplomas this month with many planning to attend college or serve their country in the military. Their perseverance is shown through the Marianas High School students I met who won the right to represent the Marianas in the Congressional App Challenge for the second year in a row. And this year's Congressional Art Competition winner Ms. Julia Theresa Malate's artwork, "Marianas Strong" shows the strength of the people of the Marianas after Super Typhoon Yutu devastated our islands.

The U.S. Virgin Islands, or USVI, and Puerto Rico were also devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. In USVI, it took 5 weeks for affected public schools to finally reopen. Over a year later, these reopened schools continue to struggle with damaged physical and technological infrastructure.

While this Committee extended an invitation to our friends in Puerto Rico to testify, we were disappointed they could not join us today.

In response to these disasters, Congress has thrice approved funding to provide relief to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Yet, very little of the most helpful educational disaster relief funding has been spent and FEMA has not started rebuilding schools.

Elsewhere in our country, California was also devastated by natural disasters. Over the last two years, California has been ravaged by the state's worst wildfires in history, killing over 100 people, destroying nearly 20,000 homes, and cutting-off schooling for thousands of students for weeks. In total, 12 schools were destroyed, and 14 schools were damaged.

Beyond the damage the wildfires caused to infrastructure, air quality was severely impacted. The teachers' union in Oakland Unified School District asked that masks be provided for all students and teachers if district officials did not close the schools.

School communities in the Marianas, Puerto Rico, USVI, and Northern California face unique challenges to recovering from natural disasters. Yet, the common thread across these crises is a federal government that refuses to put people before politics and acknowledge the impact climate change has on communities.

Worse still, until this week, Republican lawmakers repeatedly blocked passage of a key funding bill to assist communities recovering from Super Typhoon Yutu, the Northern California wildfires, Hurricane Maria, and other recent disasters. The \$19 billion disaster relief package includes \$165 million to address recovery-related educational needs. The bill also mandates GAO audits and investigations that will further assist this committee's work to oversee and improve the federal government's disaster response.

While we may disagree in our assessments of federal responses to natural disasters, the underlying crisis we face is undeniable: climate change caused by human activities has worsened natural disasters and made emergency preparedness in schools more difficult. As climate change continues to intensify, the federal government's responsibility to provide school communities with the resources to recover from natural disasters is more important now than ever before.

Today's hearing is a critical first step towards ensuring that students, families, and school staff can rely on the federal government to help them not only recover from natural disasters but emerge stronger.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us today and I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Allen, for his opening statement.