

Testimony of John L. Winn Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

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

June 5, 2019

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee to share Florida’s approach to quickly reopening schools after a disaster has forced closure. I will focus on the state of Florida’s activities to open schools after hurricanes Charley, Frances, Jeanne, and Ivan devastated much of Florida in 2004.

Florida has a full complement of emergency operations personnel that run simulations of disasters and rescue and recovery activities. These personnel coordinate partnerships with federal, state and local agencies. States rely on federal agencies such as FEMA, US Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, and the military as well as private industry, charities, and volunteer groups to facilitate recovery. Such partnerships are essential for comprehensive disaster relief and opening schools.

Comprehensive school recovery is not possible without the leadership and involvement of the state governor. In 2004 Governor Jeb Bush made disaster relief a top state priority. He directed each state agency head to participate in the effort. For the first time, opening schools became a high priority behind hospitals and nursing homes. Prolonged school closures have serious student learning consequences and present major safety issues for children who may be injured due to storm damage.

What We Learned

We learned that preparation is important. School districts and schools should protect electronics, back up data and financial systems to offsite locations or the cloud, identify and staff schools as emergency shelters, communicate contingencies to parents, protect school buses and other vehicles, and initiate plans for recovery. New technology and social media have made these preparations much easier.

We learned that school personnel are not ready for outside assistance immediately after a hurricane. They need time to recover from shock, assess damage, and deal with personal loss before help can be utilized. Emergency management agencies focused immediately on rescue efforts and providing water, food, medical and other critical needs to affected communities. During that time the Florida Department of Education assigned personnel to serve as primary contacts for each school district.

We learned that most school districts were used to taking care of their own issues and were new to asking for help, especially from nontraditional sources. They needed to

become aware of outside partners who were willing and able to help recovery. Bringing partners to district recovery planning meetings helped to accomplish this goal.

We learned that virtually everyone was willing to help when contacted by the governor or on behalf of the governor.

School Recovery Activities

The following illustrates some of the ways partners and team members contributed to the overall effort to open schools as soon as possible. These partnerships evolved as we examined everything needed for schools to make a smooth transition for faculty, students and parents. 'Return to normalcy' was the organizing principle of recovery.

- State engineers and facilities personnel assisted in damage evaluation and rebuilding plans.
- Relocatable classroom manufacturers had waiting lists for new classrooms so school superintendents scheduled to receive orders agreed to redirect their deliveries to schools needing to reopen.
- Book companies provided books free of charge to students to read while schools were closed. Many were distributed in FEMA-operated food locations.
- The national guard construction units helped clear debris, set up relocatable classrooms, and clear back roads along bus routes.
- The national guard directed traffic, provided extra security, and drove buses in one school district where drivers had gone elsewhere.
- Retailers were asked and agreed to provide computers, backpacks, and school supplies for students and teachers.
- Some newspapers printed age appropriate activity booklets for students to use at home.
- The recovery team called utility company CEO's to speed up providing electricity to schools that were otherwise ready to open.
- Farmers helped with extra fuel to get buses running.
- Colleges and universities granted additional time to complete coursework for soldiers who could not attend classes due to recovery duty.
- The governor signed executive orders to waive state regulations that impeded recovery or would have had other damaging effects on schools.
- The legislature provided gradual decline in funding for districts that lost students due to families relocating.
- Numerous deadlines were extended to give schools additional time to file reports, write grants, and the like.
- Schools in some districts instituted double sessions to get all students back in school sooner.
- Thousands of volunteers donated time to help in virtually every facet of recovery.

Clearly, successful disaster recovery for schools requires a massive coordinated effort by many good people. I am sure that disaster recovery has improved over the years.

Florida has shared its experiences widely which we hope has contributed to this improvement.

Thank you for your kind attention.