LESSONS LEARNED

Gulf Coast educators share technology tips for emergency preparedness.

by Vicki Powers

School districts in the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast areas experienced extreme challenges last year, but job one after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was to reopen the schools to bring some normalcy back to their students' lives. And while technology is never the first priority in an emergency, prioritizing technology in the planning stage can make a huge difference in mitigating the damage of a disaster.

Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish, east of New Orleans, experienced a direct hit from Hurricane Katrina, with extreme wind and flood levels up to 20 feet deep. Nearly every structure received significant damage, including 14 still-unusable schools. Ten weeks after the disaster, however, 334 students returned to St. Bernard Unified, which combined 15 schools into one for pre-K through 12th grade. Classes were held in trailers, in tents, and on the second floor while the first floor was rehabilitated. Roughly 2,300 students completed the school year, even though many families still lived in FEMA tents and trailers. (See page 28 for a story on St. Bernard Parish

Public Schools superintendent Doris Voitier.)

Biloxi, Miss., a community of 50,000, lost one-fourth of its structures and experienced severe flooding from the 30- to 35-foot storm surge. Yet one month after the disaster, half of Biloxi's 6,125 students returned to school, and by the end of May 2006, more than 4,500 students were back in school. Biloxi Senior High School principal Pamela Manners says the school district has gone through several hurricanes and their schools are used for shelters, so they had already developed a crisis plan with state, federal, and local officials. But Katrina threw them for a loop. "No one ever thought the storm surge would be so devastating," Manners says. "We realized we needed to be more specific in our plan."

The dedicated educators who brought these schools back to life learned plenty of life lessons from their experiences. *Cable in the Classroom Magazine* asked two of them to share the lessons relating to technology that would be most helpful to other educators in preparing for future emergencies.

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For More Information

For a list of steps educators can take to be prepared for emergencies, go to www.ciconline.org/beprepared.

1 Create a comprehensive communications plan.

"We lost communication big time after the storm," says Carl Gaines Jr., district technology coordinator for St. Bernard Parish Public Schools. "We realized we needed to increase alternate means of communication and not be dependent on one form, but have many available to us." For example, he says, having alternate sites for web servers is critical. The school web server went down, so administrators, teachers, and parents relied on other sources to keep in touch. His superintendent started communicating through the State Department of Education website; Gaines set up a new server in Baton Rouge; and a New Orleans' newspaper carried a blog on its website, where people continually logged in with new information. "That was awesome," Gaines says. "That's how we kept in touch."

In Biloxi, parents and employees also relied on the school's website to get contact information and learn whether schools were open. But Manners learned the hard way the importance of getting emergency numbers and cell phone numbers for school personnel in advance. Unfortunately, without a list of contact numbers, Manners spent many frantic hours trying to reach personnel. "We needed to do a better job of keeping track of people," Manners says. "I didn't know who was staying and who was going."

Building a good relationship with your telecommunications provider is also critical, Gaines says. He sounds proud when he recalls that St. Bernard Schools was one of the first Cox Communications customers in the parish to have Internet and phone service restored. He attributes that to the strong relationship Cox and the schools have developed over the years. "This parish is still devastated, but we're in one of those little pockets of restoration," says Gaines. "Some areas look the same as the day after Katrina. Cox continues working and is still maintaining our services."

2 Back up your backups.

St. Bernard Parish schools had backups of their data because Gaines and the IT department took important data off-site during the evacuation. Although employees could not return to the district building until October, the IT department could crank out payroll and accounting, and

"Without that data, we couldn't have resurrected the school system."

Gaines launched the school website's backup version on another server. "Without that data, we couldn't have resurrected the school system," he says. The lesson they learned from this storm was that, in reality, they need several backups. With employees scattered far and wide and out of contact, anything could have happened to the two individuals who took the data off-site.

In Biloxi, teachers followed the emergency procedures, covering, shutting down, and protecting computers, and then taking backup CDs with them. But even so, Manners says, "You still lose a lot." Something as taken for granted as e-mail is a case in point. Several weeks after the storm, the entire district lost all of its e-mail due to a system malfunction. "There is a backup system, but for some reason we never got our archived

e-mail back," she says. Had there been a redundant backup system in place, that problem might have been avoided.

3 Be prepared mentally that anything can happen.

Biloxi Senior High usually serves as a shelter for 200 to 300 people with special needs during disasters, but everyone quickly realized that Katrina was not a normal storm. As the situation worsened, police and firefighters started bringing people who needed medical care into the school, and the school served as a medical center with on-site doctors and nurses. At its peak, the school sheltered approximately 900 people, about 120 with special needs. The school ultimately became a multipurpose support center when Manners opened a store to give out free food and clothing as well as Red Cross checks.

"This was an unusual circumstance where so many people were homeless," Manners says. "There is no way to have a plan to be able to say, 'If A happens, we'll do B.' You just do things you need to do and think on your feet."

A generator was especially helpful in enabling the school to function. As a fairly new school, Biloxi Senior High controls its lights and climate by a computer. Even the doors and toilets are part of that electronic system, so having no power brings its own technology challenges to the building. Manners says computer experts from FEMA rewired the building to enable computer access and air conditioning through a generator. This helped everyone, especially the medical patients, as the temperature reached 100°F outside.

With hurricane season in full swing again, Gulf Coast school administrators are watching with bated breath. They may have learned many lessons from last year's disaster, but, like the rest of us, they're not anxious to put them in action any time soon. ::

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