

Growing Through Adversity

How schools are fostering recovery and resilience after the North Bay Firestorm

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A flag in Mrs. Tracy Henry's classroom at Schaefer Elementary was singed by the fires that burned close to the school. She kept it up as a sign of resilience.

A Letter of Gratitude



The North Bay firestorms took a devastating toll on our educational community, but what shines through is the strength and unity at work in our schools. This Bulletin is dedicated to celebrating that good work—and providing tools to help it continue.

On behalf of the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE), I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the men and women who worked tirelessly to get schools back up and running, many of whom have lost their own homes.

Thank you to custodial staff for providing our students with a clean school environment to return to by replacing air filters, cleaning desks, and power washing school grounds. Thank you to office staff for your diligent record keeping and communication with parents during chaotic times. Thank you to teachers and counselors for adjusting your life schedules to provide guidance, comfort, and stability to our children. Thank you to school and district administration for your dedicated leadership and coordination.

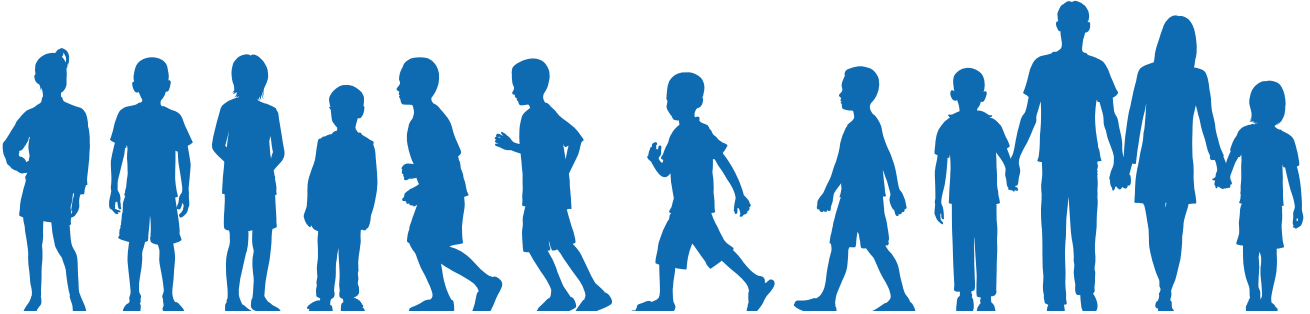
You play an essential role in ensuring the success of Sonoma County students, and you couldn't be more valuable in these challenging times.

**—Steven D. Herrington, Ph.D.
Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools**



The Firestorm's Toll

1,450 public school students lost their homes



250 public school employees lost homes



One public school farm and onsite teacher residence was destroyed



Two public schools were partially or fully destroyed



Two public campuses were closed for months due to toxic ash/debris in the neighborhoods surrounding them



Inspiration from the Ashes

From the first intense days of survival and logistics to the following months of cleanup and recovery, Sonoma County school employees were tested in unprecedented ways by the North Bay firestorm. Bus drivers, teachers, school administrators, and many others proved themselves to be courageous, dedicated, and innovative. Here are just a few of the hundreds of stories of heroism.

Driving Others to Safety

Through the tragedy of disaster and the beginning of the recovery, we can see the character of those we live and work with.

—Joseph Pandolfo, RVUSD

In the middle of the night on Oct. 9, a team of five bus drivers from **Rincon Valley Union School District (RVUSD)** left their homes and families to help transport blankets, pillows, and other supplies to evacuation shelters. To do so, they had to drive through fires blazing on either side of Highway 101. After a short break early Monday morning, they were asked to help again: Medically fragile patients from the Sonoma Developmental Center needed to be transported to safety. They could only be moved in special wheel chair buses, and those buses were in short supply. “Without hesitation, drivers raced to their buses, and taking many detours to avoid the fires, arrived in Sonoma... to begin the evacuations of patients and supplies to safer facilities,” wrote RVUSD Deputy Superintendent Joseph Pandolfo in a letter read at a board meeting. “I believe we can confidently say that we have never been prouder of an employee group as we are of these bus drivers.”

Sheltering the Community

Schools always act as hubs of resources and information for the families they serve, but during the firestorm a

half dozen or more schools opened their doors to the broader community as emergency shelters. One of these was **Sonoma Valley High School**. More than 200 community members and school employees came together to run the shelter over the course of eight days, serving more than 600 evacuees. Teachers and classified employees helped staff the shelter, while district managers put their leadership skills to work running the shelter. These efforts transformed the Sonoma Valley High gym into a comforting place where people could spend the night, get needed supplies, and eat warm meals provided by a local Rotary club and the **Sonoma Valley Unified School District’s** food management team.

“We are incredibly proud of all of our staff who worked together in partnership with the city and community in remarkable ways to ensure our community members were well cared for during this very trying time,” said school district leadership in a video they published.



A shelter is prepared for evacuees at Sonoma Valley High School.



Inspiration from the Ashes (continued)



Students from Roseland Collegiate Prep, a school destroyed in the fire, thank UC Irvine for a supportive donation.

Embracing Community Support

Community offers for support have poured in to the most impacted school districts. Despite the many other challenges they faced, schools found ways to channel this generosity for the good of their students.

Schaefer Elementary in the **Piner-Olivet Union School District** survived the fire but the neighborhood around it was destroyed. One teacher, who had taught generations of the neighborhood's residents during her 22 years at the school, sprang into action. Just days after the fire, Tracy Henry had already launched an online fundraiser to gather money for her students and their families faster than the larger fire relief funds could. Then she worked with an outside group to organize Winter Wonderland, a huge holiday event for the families affected by the fire. The event included a visit from Santa, donated books, pajamas, and gifts, and many more resources for families. "The outpouring of support was amazing," Ms. Henry said.

Roseland Collegiate Prep (RCP) was severely damaged by fire. With the help of their Community Engagement Coordinator, **Roseland School District** received donations to help resupply classrooms—teachers from other districts donated math and gym supplies, while a nonprofit will be painting RCP's temporary new home in school colors. Other donations addressed students' emotional needs: TJ Carrie of the Oakland Raiders hosted a Build-a-Bear Workshop for a class of first graders, while UC Irvine donated inspiring college gear to RCP students.

College Help for Seniors

On Nov. 7, **Santa Rosa High School** hosted a special Community Cares College App Night to ensure students affected by the fires didn't fall behind with important application deadlines. Nearly 50 college representatives from across California, school counselors, and others joined together to volunteer their expertise and time for students seeking extra support. Counselors also helped students get extensions on college application deadlines. Students got added help when **County Superintendent Steve Herrington** worked with state leaders to reschedule the all-important College Board (SAT) exams.



A student receives guidance at Community Cares College App night.

Supporting Students in and out of School

At **Mark West Union School District**, the counseling team started preparing materials for families and staff days after the fires started. "Our first thought was the enormity of the situation," said District Counselor Lionel Cooper. "We started planning how we could help as many students as we could." As soon as the district learned of students affected by the fires, Mr. Cooper and his team began reaching out to them. By the time school resumed, the counseling team had a detailed plan that all teachers could use to help students process what had happened, as well as tools to help teachers identify signs of trauma. Counselors from across the Bay Area volunteered to help run crisis counseling centers set up with puppets, art supplies, and much more. "We made sure the priority was a welcoming and safe environment for students to return to," said Rachel Valenzuela, Director of Student Services.



Teaching After the Firestorm

“Taking time in schools to help children adjust to disaster and aftermath is essential to promote academic achievement.”

—Dr. David Schonfeld
Director of the National Center for
School Crisis and Bereavement at USC



School Response can Help With the Healing Process

A school’s response can help or hinder students’ ability to heal and even grow after a disaster. “Anyone who interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support,” said Dr. David Schonfeld, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, at a recent talk to school superintendents at SCOE. He encouraged school leaders to prepare all their employees to help students who might be struggling after the fire.

Dr. Schonfeld, who has helped schools respond to disasters ranging from the Sandy Hook shooting to the September 11 attacks, acknowledged that many educators may feel unprepared or ill-equipped to help students with emotional issues. But he said, everyone from school bus drivers, to custodians, to teachers can play a key role just by doing something they’re already good at: listening and being attentive to the children they care for.

“This isn’t about therapy or treatment, it’s about being supportive. Be present, observant, let (students) know we are here for you. And that goes a long way,” Dr. Schonfeld said. It’s important to be flexible with students—and staff—who have been through a

disaster, he added: “When you have kids or staff that are struggling and they feel they aren’t keeping up to expectations, that puts a lot of stress on them.” Flexibility can include adapting an assignment (i.e., from an oral to written task, if the child is nervous about public speaking) or changing a due date for a struggling student.

Accepting Change

Dr. Schonfeld encouraged schools to embrace the changes brought about by the firestorm. This could mean accepting that classes may not catch up with the work missed during the fire. “Focus on catching up with students’ ability to learn, not catching up with all the facts,” he encouraged. “You can’t make up for the time you’ve missed. But you have to realize students have learned other skills in that time. They’ve learned compassion. They’ve learned resilience.”

He also urged schools not to withdraw support too soon. Even though the firestorm is over, students could continue to feel the effects in a variety of ways—for up to two years. Most students, he explained, will quickly rebound to the emotional “baseline” they were at before the fire. Others, facing different circumstances, may never fully return to baseline. Yet others, with enough support, can grow from this difficult experience.



Teaching After the Firestorm (continued)

Expect a Range of Reactions

Following are some behaviors that could indicate that a student is struggling to adjust after the fires. However, it's important to keep in mind that all students grieve differently. A student's behavior can also change over time, in response to something that reminds them of the disaster or another stressful life event.

"You should never withhold services or support to a child because they don't seem to be distressed," urged Dr. Schonfeld. "If they've been through something difficult, you should be offering support."



Self-care is Important

Teaching after a disaster presents unprecedented challenges. Many school employees themselves lost homes or were seriously affected by the fires. Even those who were not directly affected can become distressed through helping others who are suffering.

Staff must balance their own needs with those of their students, experts urge. This includes watching out for stress-related health problems and taking time to care for yourself through diet, exercise, and other means. If you are feeling overwhelmed, see if your school district offers an employee assistance program. These programs offer a range of free services to employees, from therapy sessions to financial advice and much more.

Secondary Trauma

Students and staff who weren't directly affected by the fire can still suffer setbacks in its aftermath and require support. Some causes of **secondary trauma** include:

- Relocation
- Loss of peer network
- Academic failure
- New social network
- Financial stresses
- Parental stress or mental health issues

Students adjusting to a disaster might show..



- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety
- School avoidance (fear of coming to school)



- Anxiety/trauma related fears
- Concentration problems
- Deterioration in academic performance



- Regression (including social regression)
- Depression (including avoiding previously enjoyed activities)



- Substance abuse
- Physical symptoms (such as increased headaches or fatigue)

If ignored, these symptoms can lead to...



- Absenteeism
- Suspensions/expulsions
- Lower cognitive functioning and academic achievement



- More sleep problems/depression
- Can ultimately affect graduation



Learn More



Online Resources

Resources from the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement:

- Watch Dr. David Schonfeld's presentation at SCOE about supporting students who have been in a natural disaster. Topics covered include: Secondary losses and stressors for students, staff, and parents; crisis stabilization strategies within schools and school districts; and leadership strategies in times of crisis. [Available here](#) or at scoe.org.
- More resources are available at the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at USC, or schoolcrisiscenter.org.

Resources for Educators and Parents: SCOE has curated a web page full of resources on student mental health and the rights of displaced students. [Access it here](#) or find it via the scoe.org homepage.



Professional Development Opportunities

Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS): This spring, SCOE will be using grant money to provide **free** training in CBITS to any interested teachers in Sonoma County. The grant will also cover the cost of substitutes. More information will be available soon at scoe.org/training.

Challenges of Youth Conference: This **free** conference, on April 12, features student resilience expert Christian Moore as keynote speaker and includes breakout sessions on trauma-informed instruction, suicide prevention, violence prevention, and cyberbullying prevention. Takes place at SCOE. Learn more and register at scoe.org/youth.



Questions about this publication?

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