

After the floods, Louisiana schools struggling with displaced teachers

By The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.25.16

Word Count **858**



This aerial photo over Hammond, Louisiana, shows flooded Hammond Eastside Elementary Magnet School and Hammond High Magnet School after heavy rains inundated the region August 13. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards says more than 1,000 people in south Louisiana have been rescued from homes, vehicles and even trees as a slow-moving storm hammers the state with flooding. Photo: AP Photo/Max Becherer

BAKER, Louisiana -- An historic flood in Louisiana has delayed or interrupted the start of school for tens of thousands of children in the state.

The flood closed 22 school districts last week — and the superintendent of one of them is living in an emergency shelter. Most of them, though, plan to welcome students back within the next two weeks, according to John White, the Louisiana state superintendent.

But school leaders are far more worried about making sure they have enough teachers than they are about the flooded classrooms, White said.

"There is the facility and capacity in the region to serve all students," he said. "The greater challenge is displacement, especially of teachers."

About 4,000 teachers and other important school staff members, such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers and janitors, have been flooded out of their homes.

Restoring Routine And Sense Of Security

One challenge for schools is whether they will be able to provide students with a feeling of security and routine. Just as important, though, is whether students — many of whom come from low-income families — will lose out on more precious learning time.

East Baton Rouge Parish Schools, the second largest district in the state, had started school just two days before the city flooded. So far, six schools there are too damaged to reopen, and that number will likely rise, spokeswoman Adonica Pelichet Duggan said.

District officials are planning to combine schools until all buildings can be reopened. In some cases, two schools will be in the same building. However, the students are missing class time and their school routine is being interrupted, and schools are scrambling to find enough teachers. All this could come at an academic cost to students. Already, students are performing below the state average on state math and reading tests and most of them are at risk, according to state data.

Students will be bused — no matter where in the district they are staying — to school sites in their home neighborhoods.

"Our students need some sense of continuity," Pelichet Duggan said. "For a lot of our students, they will eventually be moving back to their neighborhoods. We want to keep as much stability for those students as they can possibly have at this point in their lives, when everything else is chaos."

Superintendent Living In Shelter

Schools will also care for the emotional well-being of students. "It is critical that to every extent possible, schools should have counselors on hand to deal with the social and emotional needs of their students," said White, the state schools chief.

Livingston schools Superintendent Rick Wentzel said 15 of the 46 schools in his district were flooded. There was much damage in eight schools, and one-third of employees had to leave their homes, he said.

Wentzel himself now lives in a shelter after he rescued his wife by boat after their home took on 2 1/2 feet of water. "It's very, very difficult," he said.

Reopening school buildings damaged by the flood is taking long days and a lot of work.

At Baker High School on Thursday, a thin layer of mud dried in the front entrance. After days of sitting in water, the gym floor looked like a skate ramp, complete with three large wooden waves. In an office down the hall, files were spread across the floor to dry.

Devastating Experience

In the school library, nearly all of the school's textbooks were ruined by water.

City of Baker School District Superintendent Herman Brister said the flood will cost the school millions of dollars. About 550 students attend the school, the vast majority of whom are African-American and poor.

Traci Morgan, the principal at Baker High, said this experience has been devastating, and although her home survived the floods, she said she has four family members staying with her. "There is not one person who is a teacher, a custodian, a paraprofessional, a librarian or a secretary — there is not one employee of Baker High who is not impacted by this," she said. "We have students and teachers who have lost literally everything.

"When I walked in, I could see the water line," Morgan said, "and that's when it hit me."

"It Was Like A River"

James Beverly, a janitor at Baker, estimates that each room in the school had at least 2 feet of water. When he came to check for damage on Sunday, "I opened the door, and it was like a river," he said.

Victor Mock, a bus driver for Baker, spent 50 hours rescuing an estimated 800 people with his 71-passenger bus. "The water in some areas was up on the third step of the bus," he said. "It was a time when you have to let your heart overrule your mind." Less than a week later, he was using his bus to transport school supplies and books between the flooded high school and its new location.

Mock's bus will return to carrying students on Monday, when classes are set to start again in Baker.

Hannah Jones, a junior at Baker High, said she was ready.

"It's your home away from home when you go to school," she said.

Quiz

1 Which of the following options BEST supports the idea that the Louisiana flood has affected particularly vulnerable student populations?

- (A) Just as important, though, is whether students — many of whom come from low-income families — will lose out on more precious learning time.
- (B) However, the students are missing class time and their school routine is being interrupted, and schools are scrambling to find enough teachers.
- (C) Already, students are performing below the state average on state math and reading tests and most of them are at risk, according to state data.
- (D) "We have students and teachers who have lost literally everything."

2 Read the paragraph below from the section "Superintendent Living In Shelter."

At Baker High School on Thursday, a thin layer of mud dried in the front entrance. After days of sitting in water, the gym floor looked like a skate ramp, complete with three large wooden waves. In an office down the hall, files were spread across the floor to dry.

Which inference is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) Most of the damage done to flooded school buildings could be repaired.
- (B) Flooded school buildings were damaged in a variety of ways.
- (C) The water in the flooded school buildings caused more material damage than structural damage.
- (D) Extensive work is being done to repair flooded school buildings.

3 Which of the following people quoted in the article would be MOST likely to agree with the idea that schools need to be prepared to address the mental health issues of students impacted by the flood?

- (A) John White
- (B) Adonica Pelichet Duggan
- (C) Rick Wentzel
- (D) Traci Morgan

- 4 Which of the following answer choices would BEST describe Victor Mock's reaction to the destruction of the flood?
- (A) His fear for his own life and the lives of others caused him to seek out ways to help people that didn't put himself in harm's way.
 - (B) His sense of powerlessness and frustration caused him to worry greatly about whether or not the school would ever be able to open again for students and their families.
 - (C) His compassion and concern for students and their families motivated him to break the rules of what a school bus could be used for to help others.
 - (D) His determination to help others led him to go above and beyond his responsibilities as a bus driver to ensure the safety of others and meet the needs of his community.

Answer Key

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