



SCHOOL BELLS RING FOR CHILDREN DISPLACED BY HURRICANE KATRINA

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For thousands of children displaced by Hurricane Katrina, the new school year means finding safe, familiar experiences in strange new surroundings.

When Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast last month, hundreds of thousands of people had to flee their homes with little or no belongings. Within hours, they lost any semblance to normal lives. Now, government officials are encouraging evacuated families to enroll their children in the nearest schools.

“The children in our state are too important, and we’re not going to let anything prevent us from moving forward,” Jeanne Burns, an associate state commissioner for teacher education, told Education Week.

School open doors to evacuated students

Schools in New Orleans, Louisiana are expected to be closed for several months. An estimated 125,000 New Orleans children will need schooling.

Schools from around the country have offered help. The Houston Independent School District in Texas has welcomed close to 900 students and expects to enroll 5,000 more. Other students are entering classrooms as far away as Detroit, Ohio, Georgia and Wisconsin.

Some students have met new friends and look forward to a new school.

“I’m pretty open, so that will make it better, and we’ve already met a lot of nice people,” Paige DiMacco, a senior from suburban New Orleans who will be starting school in Arkansas, told the Seattle-Post Intelligencer.

But for many, the changes have caused great stress, and students are anxiously awaiting the day that they can return home.

“I’m shy and I have to start at a new school,” Dedrionne McCarvy, 12, who was registering at a center in Baton Rouge, La., told The Charlotte Observer.

“I’m gonna have to make new friends, but then I’m gonna have to go back to New Orleans, once they flush the water out.”

Extra supplies, classrooms and teachers

The federal government is creating a plan to help schools pay for the extra supplies, textbooks, classroom space, uniforms and additional teachers, but many school leaders say their first priority is getting all students into classes.

“I think districts will keep taking the students and figure it all out later,” Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, told the Seattle-Post Intelligencer.

Schools are also hiring some of the teachers displaced by Katrina.

Getting back to normal

Mental health and disaster relief experts say that creating a sense of normalcy is essential to rebuilding lives.

This was especially important after last year’s Asian tsunami displaced hundreds of thousands of school-age children, explained Save the Children spokesman Mike Kiernan, whose organization hopes to open after-school programs for Katrina’s victims.

“We want to create an environment as close to normal as possible – where kids are doing things - - riding a bike, throwing a football, drawing, etc. -- fun activities that allow kids to process what they’ve experienced,” Kiernan said.

Parents hope familiar school routines will help children recover from the terrifying ordeal of escaping the storm and floods.

“They’ll have to concentrate on their books, homework and lessons, instead of the water we walked through,” Brandon Roberts, parent of a New Orleans kindergartner, told The Charlotte Observer.

Safe places for children are essential, especially when their parents are struggling to find jobs, homes and to reconnect with families and friends, experts say.

“I’m depressed, I’m stressed out,” Selika Thomas, a 30-year-old mother of two who worked as a hotel chef in New Orleans, told the Associated Press.

“It all happened so fast. We see this every day, homeless people living in the streets, but I didn’t expect it to happen to our whole city.”

Reuniting children and parents

Many children in the Gulf Coast area are still waiting to be reunited with their families.

The U.S. Department of Justice has asked the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to coordinate a process to unite missing children and families.

Names, descriptions and photos, when available, of missing children and adults are being posted to the NCMEC Web site at www.missingkids.com.

According to a NCMEC spokeswoman, more than 729 children across the region have been reported as missing due to Katrina as of Sept. 6.

Families looking to be reunited can call the NCMEC Katrina Hotline at 1-888-544-5475 for more information.

Volunteers armed with mobile phones, digital cameras and scanners are fanning out across the region to help families find images for the Web site.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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