



Lessons Learned from Hurricane Michael 2018

A peer guide to help school personnel prepare for and recover from a disaster.



NOAA's GOES-East captured this image of Hurricane Michael as it came ashore near Mexico Beach, Florida on Oct. 10, 2018. According to the National Hurricane Center, Michael intensified before landfall with maximum sustained winds of 160 mph, heavy rainfall, and deadly storm surge. From Hurricane Michael Upgraded to a Category 5 at Time of U.S. Landfall, by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Feltgen, 2019 (<https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/hurricane-michael-upgraded-to-category-5-at-time-of-us-landfall>). In public domain.



HURRICANE STORM
SURGE ELEVATIONS

CATEGORY

5

CATEGORY

4

CATEGORY

3

CATEGORY

2

CATEGORY

1

This guide was developed by 7-Dippity, Inc. for Bay District Schools as part of the school district's Hurricane Michael recovery programs. It is dedicated to the entire Bay District Schools family. Your courage and resilience in the face of total devastation are an inspiration to the world.

Thank you to all of the Bay District School employees who volunteered their time to share their personal stories and insights for this material.

Authors:

Scott Sevin, President 7-Dippity, Inc.

Elizabeth Granzow, MSW 7-Dippity, Inc.

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Prologue

On October 10, 2018, Category 5 Hurricane Michael, one of the most intense storms ever to strike the United States, slammed into the Florida Panhandle, triggering a disaster on a scale never before seen in the Florida Panhandle. The communities and individuals affected by the storm were forever changed.

While the hurricane itself was a terrifying, tragic and challenging experience, what occurred next, in its aftermath, was just as daunting. The natural disaster was compounded by a human-created one. The lack of proper mental health support and resources in the wake of the storm resulted in a severe mental health crisis. Our Bay District School (BDS) students, staff, and families suffered tremendously. Still, in 2022, many are still struggling to cope. This preventable mental health crisis, which should not have occurred, will remain a lasting legacy of Hurricane Michael.

No one should ever have to experience the challenges that our school district and community suffered in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael. To help ensure this doesn't happen again, this Peer Guide has been developed as a way of capturing some of our experiences and insights so that we may share our lessons learned with others who may have to deal with similar circumstances in the future.

The information contained in this Peer Guide comes directly from first-person interviews of BDS staff. We understand all too well that each disaster and everyone's situation and needs will be different. Take what you will from this material. It is our sincere hope that these insights and lessons learned will provide some measure of support for your school district and community in times of emergency.

We also hope you take solace in the fact that others have walked in your shoes, and – despite incredible challenges – managed to come out in a better place on the other side.

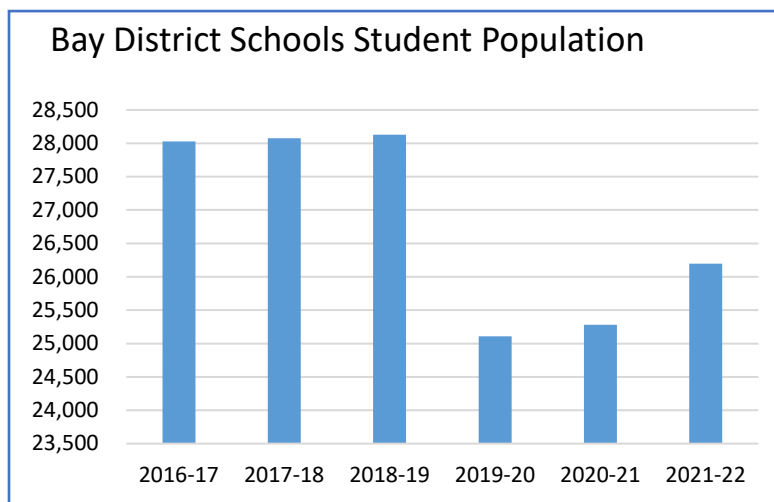
From the authors of this document:

“This resource is three and a half years in the making as we still grapple with the ongoing impact Hurricane Michael had on our community. I am hopeful that the document we are providing will give a glimpse into the types of decisions we had to make. I hope that other communities and school districts are able to use this document to engage in conversations before the storm - and not after.”

“In Bay County, we feel like we basically invented the wheel, and we learned all the lessons the hard way after Hurricane Michael. It would have been really helpful to have some guides, some resources, and not feel like we were banging our heads against a brick wall all day, every single day, seven days a week. That's one reason why we are creating this.”



Hurricane Michael Background



The hurricane impacted student enrollment for several years (FLDOE, n.d.).

Preparation & Pre-Planning Before The Storm

There can be a sense of complacency among residents living in Florida and other hurricane-prone areas when it comes to approaching storms. After all, hurricanes can be unpredictable and can deviate from their forecasted path or intensity. It is not uncommon for impacts to be less than anticipated in a given area. Weather forecasting is an inexact science, and emergency officials tend to err on the side of caution.

Note: Quotes throughout the remainder of this document come from various employees in BDS – the superintendent, district staff, instructional staff, and support staff, for example.

“Before the storm, it was actually a running joke in my district that our Superintendent just has bad luck with weather. If the Superintendent called for a Hurricane Day, we didn’t get a drop of rain, right? If he didn’t call it, the heavens opened up.”

“I’ve lived in Florida my whole life...And so the storm that we began to watch seemed like it was not anything interesting or worth bothering about. It was like one of those storms where our district [will] close the schools when people outside of the school system don’t think they should. My [relative] was like, ‘Yeah, I bet we’re going to close schools for this and then, you know, there won’t even be any broken twigs to pick up.’”

“I’m a lifelong Floridian. I think when I finally tapped into it, it was like a [Category] 2, maybe a rising Category 3. I was dealing with something else. It really wasn’t very serious to me at the time. [We] went and got snacks and potato chips and rum. So, I’m like ‘Whatever, it’s no big deal.’ And then, as it got closer and as we boarded up, it got worse. Obviously, it got more serious.”

However, there are times when the forecast underestimates the reality.

“The storm escalated very quickly. It wasn’t supposed to be that big of a storm. You know, we get a lot of storm; and so I’ve left for some of them; and they ended up not being a big deal. You know what I mean? I’ve got kids, so you’re always like, ‘Why the heck did I leave?’ or ‘Is this worth packing for?’ [But] this one was different -- very different.”

“My family and I, we all chose to stay like many of our other families because we didn’t think that it was going to be as significant or as severe as it was. We were under the impression that we were dealing with a mid-level hurricane. And we were quite surprised to find out the severity of it once we experienced it. We stayed in our home when the hurricane occurred, which was a traumatic experience in and of itself.”

[The category] of the storm played into our decision making [in] that as long as it was a category three or less, we would stay, because we’d ridden out several

Category 3 storms in the past. That was usually our decision maker. Not in the future. It was then, but not now. So, we went to bed and they were projecting a Category 3. And we woke up at three in the morning to Alert Bay on the phone, where it had been upgraded to a Category 4...I was kind of like, 'Okay, so this is really, pretty serious.'"

People are usually caught off guard when this happens.

"A friend of mine has [a relative] who works for the Panama City Beach Police Department...And I figured if she was staying, it was going to be okay...We hadn't really prepared to leave. So, the morning of the storm, I get up around 6:45am to a text from her. They left basically at like four o'clock in the morning. And at that point, when I got up, they were saying, 'You can't leave. If you have not left at this point, you need to hunker down.' And you know, to be honest, I had always kind of considered myself a pretty strong person. And I had a complete meltdown...I remember, just like, that kind of heavy breathing, like panic. I totally and completely panicked."

"I'm not from here. I use [my husband's family] as a gauge of whether I should freak out or not. And everyone that we know was like, 'Oh, it's just a hurricane. We've done this before.' Yada, yada, yada...So, we joked around and we did take some precautions. [However] that evening, we started to freak out I think around eight or nine. But at that point it was too late to do anything. It was one of those where all of our leaders are like. 'Oh it's fine. Everything's fine.' And then it was like, 'Oh, it's not fine.'"

"A Category 3 for us is kind of like, 'Okay, we'll hang out. We'll make sure we've got the trees out of the way. We'll put the patio furniture away.' So, I don't want to say nonchalant but a Category 3 for us was pretty nonchalant. And then as it grew in strength, by the time it was about to hit it became a Category 4. And by then it was really too late for us to leave at that point."

This is one reason why it is better to be over-prepared than under-prepared when a hurricane approaches.

"We weren't prepared for the hurricane at all. I had gone up to the school for other ones, and nothing ever happened. You know, spending the night in my classroom. It was no big deal. When we went to bed that night, it was a Category 3. And when we woke up the next morning, and it was a Category 5! A lot of stuff happened that we weren't prepared for. A lot of stuff that we had to overcome."

The same holds true for school districts as it does individuals and families.

“In the workplace, we were watching it come our direction and anticipating something like what we would do if we had to close for a few days...So, we all kind of went into it, both at home and at work thinking, ‘Okay, maybe we’re just going to be out for a few days. It’s going to be a minor inconvenience.’ And we were not even remotely prepared for the level that we experienced and the aftermath, for sure!”

As the saying goes, hindsight is 20-20. Among the many lessons that BDS staff learned with Hurricane Michael was that preparation and pre-planning can make a significant difference later on.

“I’m not sure you can ever fully prepare for something like Michael. But we did learn that you sure as heck should do everything you possibly can to prepare, and that it does make a big difference! The areas where we did have plans in place went much smoother after the storm than the areas where we didn’t. Of course, there were some things we just didn’t anticipate at all. But that’s to be expected when a Category 5 hurricane hits you full on.”

“If there was any one silver lining that came out of the hurricane was that we were more prepared for the global pandemic...When COVID hit, and everybody else was scrambling to do the things; schools shutting down. We at least felt, ‘Okay, some of this feels familiar. We haven’t been down the COVID trail before, but we’ve been in this sort of uncharted territory. There’s at least a path that we can follow.”

After experiencing Hurricane Michael, BDS administrators are proponents of having comprehensive disaster plans in place for school districts.

“It all starts with having a disaster plan. And I know you hear this over and over – about how important it is to have a plan. We had a plan. But it was not up to something like Michael. So, if you think your district has a plan in place right now, it may work for some storms or some disasters, but I’m here to tell you it won’t work for something like Michael.”

“Seriously think about having a plan. You need a strategic district plan... I know that what you may come up with isn’t going to be perfect, but anything beats nothing.”

When developing a comprehensive disaster plan, there are many things to consider.

“Think about if you have to open a school back, what might that look like?”

“What about people who want to send in supplies? Where do the supplies go? How are we going to make sure that they are equitably divided among the schools? How are we going to make sure our schools in the hardest hit areas get the help they need as soon as possible?”

“What are realistic reporting places? Do people know where to go after the storm? Where are they going to meet?”

“What happens if you lose a lot of buildings? Entire campuses that are unusable? What will be your plan for getting those kids back into a classroom again?”

“What about communication? Everything was knocked out for us. No phones at all. No internet. No television. No cable. No 9-1-1 service. How do you get messages out to people in that kind of a situation?”

“How do you get kids to school if the buses aren’t functioning or if the roads are impassable or bridges are down? What are your other options?”

“What resources are out there in the community that you could utilize in times of disaster?”

Plan for different scenarios instead of just a single event.

“Have a plan that contains different options or modalities. You think about what we’re going through right now with the wildfires. So let’s say [a few schools] have to be closed for the next week or so. What would be the plan to help support those schools and that community? You know, being able to give them resources; give the teachers resources so that learning didn’t have to go interrupted for those next few weeks. You really need to have a plan that you can take and roll and run with during any type of situation.”

“[We] needed a disaster plan in response to the hurricane. But then we also needed a plan for when we had to shut down for the global pandemic.”

Contemplate worst-case scenarios. Because, as Bay District Schools found out, they can and do happen.

“I would say really think of worst-case scenarios. What happens ‘if?’...My colleague at the time, I used to call him a ‘Negative Nelly.’ But it turns out he wasn’t really being negative. He was being very pragmatic about it. You almost have to be a worst-case scenario type of person to plan for things like that.”

“As a church, we’re asking [similar] questions ourselves as we’re rebuilding. How do we take care of our church body? For example, instead of pews, we need to have some type of chairs that can be removed so it can become a huge sleeping area. Are we thinking about those similar types of things as we move forward as a school district?”

It is important to plan not just for the physical impacts of a disaster but for the psychological effects as well.

“What I did not know was the mental health part. That wasn't even on my top one hundred list. I mean, I was concerned with the kids having clothes and food and shelter. But I was not concerned about their mental health...I wish somebody had told me earlier [that] there's going to be things that you're going to have to watch out for in your students, your employees, everybody involved. It's like a powder keg...It's extremely important you take care of the people – not just the people's needs but the people themselves.”

Part of the plan should include assigning at least one trusted district employee to be based at a local Emergency Operations Center (EOC) when it is activated for a disaster.

“We learned that it was absolutely critical for us to have someone representing the school district at the EOC. For us, that was our [Director of Communications]. She helped coordinate with the other agencies. She sent messages out after the storm to our staff and families using whatever means that they had there because pretty much everything else was down initially. She played a big role in helping in so many areas, especially those first hours and days after the storm. All districts should have someone assigned to the EOC during a disaster.”

“Superintendents need to know who that person’s going to be at the EOC. And the person at the EOC has to be someone that they trust implicitly. I was making the decisions because we had no communication. So, the National Guard needed buses. And through smoke signals I was able to connect with a bus driver and I instructed that bus driver to get ten sets of keys and take these buses to this location for the National Guard. And then I saw our Superintendent two days later. And I’m like, ‘Hey, I just want to let you know, I gave away ten buses and I know who has them and this is what I did.’ And of course he fully supported that. But you got to have someone at the EOC that the Superintendent can trust to

make good decisions, because we were making big decisions on a daily basis without the benefit of being able to call somebody and check.”

It is vital that plans are in place well in advance of a disaster occurring. For example, if a district is in a hurricane-prone area, plans need to be completed months before hurricane season starts.

“It’s almost back to the old adage of ‘plan for the worst and hope for the best.’ That’s really what you have to do. And if you know that something’s going to be a barrier, where it might be a problem, plan for it in the calm before the storm... It’s about carving out that time and making sure that you set aside the time to do it, because in the heat of the moment is when you don’t want to be building the plan.”

“Plan well in advance...Much earlier than you think you have to...because then you can be thoughtful. You can really think through what it might look like. You can go down all of the different scenarios and avenues.”

Once a plan is in place, it will be important to test and update it periodically.

“I would say at least once annually talk about your plan in front of hurricane season or another [disaster] season. At least once annually review those plans of action with your team and talk about what you would do in different scenarios...such as how you would communicate with your people [when] you don’t have phone access at the time; maybe create a buddy system and figure out who would check in with who...What would be the first things you need to do when you got back to work? [Have] your department divide up into teams and figure out who's going to do what.”

How districts approach and develop their comprehensive disaster plans will differ from district to district. Something to keep in mind is that no plan, no matter how well thought out, is ever perfect.

“There’s a quote that [goes] something like, ‘No great plan survives the first impact with reality.’ I didn’t say it; I just stole that from somebody else. But I love that because it was true.”

“We’re having to be very mindful that we had great plans. But then it becomes, ‘Where do you compromise what you wanted to do as it brushes up against the reality of what you have to do?’”

Shelters

An important part of planning involves shelter operations. By serving as shelters, schools play an essential role in helping community members survive life-threatening storms such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and other disruptive events.

“Florida law allows the emergency management people to take over the schools as shelters, basically at will. If they need a shelter, they have the right to step in and come to a school.”

A number of BDS schools were designated as shelters during Hurricane Michael. The Red Cross was contracted by the Bay County to oversee the shelter operations.

“Before Hurricane Michael, the shelters were run by the Red Cross, and we were just sort of ancillary people. Like, we will always have someone onsite with a set of keys so we can open a door if needed.”

The district found that having another organization running the schools as shelters was not optimal, particularly when the shelters had to remain open for an extended period of time following Hurricane Michael.

“We discovered during Hurricane Michael that when the shelters were open for longer than they had ever been before, that no one’s going to take care of our facilities the way that we would do it. We are the landlords. We were the owners of these facilities. And so we began to see decisions that were made by the Red Cross that were not in line with the decisions that we would make.”

“When you open a shelter, all these agencies come, and they’re all playing a role and they bring stuff. The Department of Health is bringing oxygen tanks and wheelchairs and walkers and all that special needs equipment. And the Red Cross is bringing cots and different things. And they’re working with their own food vendors, who are bringing trucks and grills and all that kind of stuff. And then you’ve got FEMA, who is bringing shower trailers. And no one coordinated all

DISASTER

Last Bay County hurricane shelter closes

ZACK McDONALD zmcDonald@pcnh.com

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Cots for residents of the Bay County shelter at Arnold High School. [JOSHUA BOUCHER/THE NEWS HERALD file photo] The News Herald

PANAMA CITY BEACH — It was with a whimper rather than a bang that the last Hurricane Michael disaster shelter shut its doors on Friday

Many resident's homes were uninhabitable, and the lack of available housing required shelters to stay open for more than a month after the hurricane (McDonald, 2018).

those items – where they are, what they are, and to whom they belong. So, when we finally got to the process of demobilizing the shelters, I'm looking at a room full of oxygen tanks going, 'This has to go because this is a classroom. These items have to go to whom they belong.' And it became this monstrous ordeal of trying to track down whose stuff is what."

"I work with a number of unaccompanied youth; children who do not have parents or guardians. When they came to the shelters [during Hurricane Michael], no one would let them in because no adult could sign for them...The Red Cross wouldn't allow them in the shelters because of the liability. So I was really struggling with the Red Cross because they're using our schools as the shelters. And, you know, I'm saying that if one of our students shows up at that school, you let them in that shelter regardless. We will work it out later. Because they're not going to have the paperwork that says their unaccompanied youth; they're probably not going to have anything in the records that they can get access to in order to identify themselves as unaccompanied youth. What do you want these kids to do?"

The school district decided to ask the county if they could take over future shelter operations.

"The shelters were just a complete fiasco during Michael...We decided to ask the county if we could just take over the shelters. And the county agreed. And so that's what we are doing from now on. We are running the shelters for Bay County. It's all BDS."

"It is very, very critical that the school system, in my opinion and in our experience, takes the lead in the sheltering operations."

BDS began formulating and implementing plans to enhance shelter operations.

"We learned from Hurricane Michael that our people must run these shelters. We must run them like we run the schools. We have designated daytime and nighttime shelter managers who are responsible for the location of all the assets so we know what's there, where it came from, and who it belongs to."

"The Red Cross had struggled every day with an accurate shelter census – how many people were in the shelters. Their system was literally like head counting. We're going to swipe people in and out and keep spreadsheets and logs. We're going to know who's supposed to be there at all times."

BDS staff learned a number of lessons while operating the shelters in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael.

“If any school system feels as if they’re in the role where they may be asked to run a shelter, whether it’s one or all of the shelters, they need to have a very specific idea of how that’s going to go. Because you only get one chance to open a shelter correctly -- to start it the way that you want it to go. And there are so many things to think about -- like with special needs folks and the whole HIPPA part and their medical equipment and where can they be safe...Having the right port-a-potties. For example, I already have an agreement with a port-a-potty company to bring port-a-potties to those shelters that are most likely to have a compromised lift station because of what we went through in Hurricane Michael. So there are lots and lots of moving parts that we’ve learned the hard way.”

“We learned that it is vital to have the right partners helping you at the shelter. You need organizations and contractors that you can work with and trust and who can adapt to changing situations and needs. I think we do a much better job now that we know who we can count on -- like bringing in the right equipment, making sure things are functioning the way they should, making sure enough food is available, making sure the pets are taken care of properly. You have to work as a team because you are caring for a lot of different people with different needs, and anything can happen.”

“Shelter work is very difficult. You’re dealing with people in crisis at their worst; I mean worse than the worst day of school. They’re at a crisis. So, it’s not something that you can sustain for very long.”

BDS also learned that not all staff may be a good fit for running a shelter. There may be some employees who do not feel comfortable in such a position.

“One of the expectations of the district is that we, as administrators, run the shelters, which, personally, I have never been in favor of. Yes, it's our buildings and we know the buildings inside and out, but that's a whole different thing to do and to run. I don't think it's fair to ask us to take on those kinds of roles...It really is a huge responsibility.”

As BDS continues to learn and refine their shelter strategies, many in the district and community are confident they are now much more prepared to deal with a major disaster if and when the next one occurs.

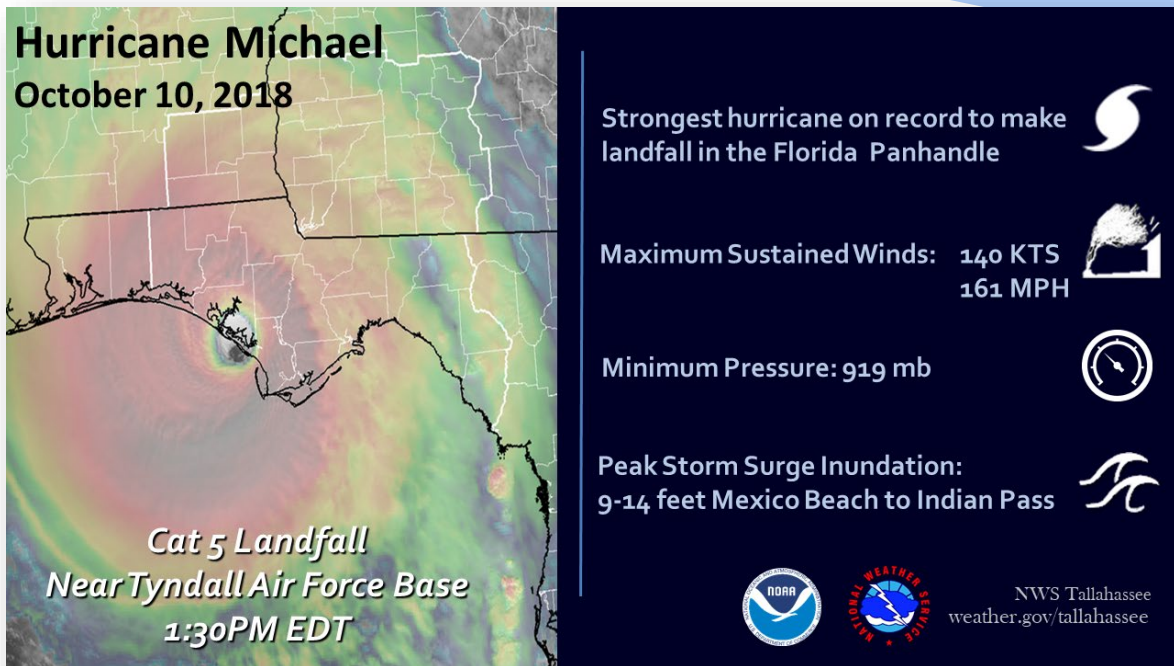
“Now we are much better prepared. When the next storm rolled around, I was at a conference [out of town]. I left that conference early and drove home. I did not even take that rental car back to the airport until I had turned that building into a shelter...Everything was in place...I grabbed my ‘Go’ bag and my cot that I keep on campus...We were ready. I’ve become a lot more streamlined.”

“When the families get there, and they see that you're prepared and you're organized, that gives them a sense of relief. And that really helps them, I'm sure, with their mental health. They're better able to process everything, because if they know that their family is okay, their pets are okay, and that they are all in capable hands, that will really help them out.”

There is much value in taking stock of lessons learned from each disaster to better inform preparation for the next. It is hoped that the information found throughout this material will be supportive in helping other school districts better plan and prepare for future disasters that may impact their areas.



The Storm & Immediate Aftermath



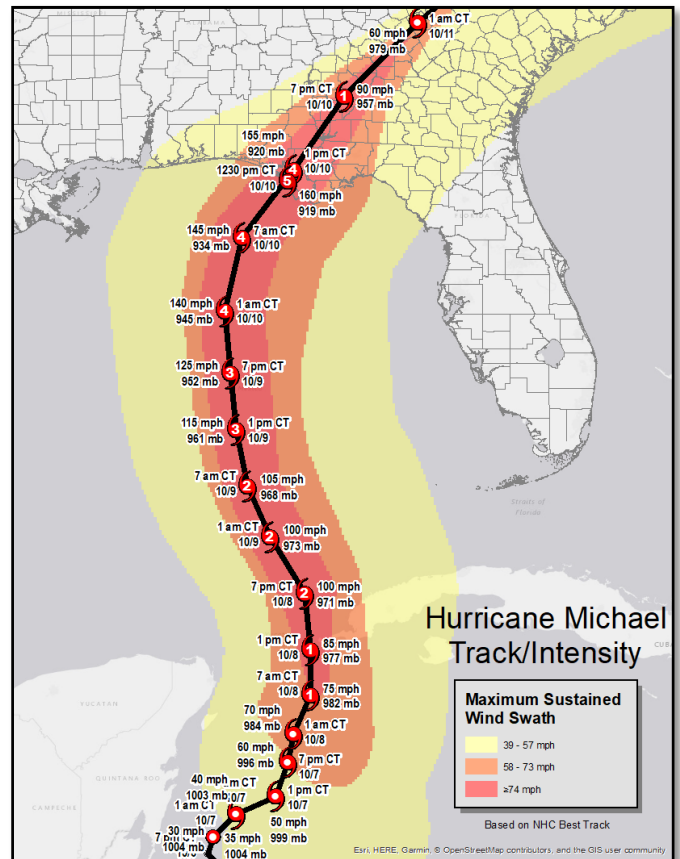
Hurricane Michael's strength and size created a huge impact. From Hurricane Michael 2018, by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d. (<https://www.weather.gov/tae/HurricaneMichael2018>). In public domain.

Landfall

On the morning of October 10, 2018, Bay County residents hunkered down as Hurricane Michael approached. The storm rapidly intensified as it closed in on the coastline. While it was initially classified as a Category 4 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Scale, post-storm analysis by the National Hurricane Center showed the hurricane was indeed a Category 5 when it made landfall.

"We couldn't believe what we were seeing. The pressure kept dropping and dropping and the winds kept going up seemingly by the minute."

As Hurricane Michael came ashore, the eyewall, containing the storm's most intense weather, spread over a large part of Bay County. Residents east of the Hathaway Bridge experienced the worst of the storm, with the wind and rain becoming ever more forceful the closer one was to Tyndall Air Force Base.



The hurricane's rapid intensification surprised many. From Hurricane Michael 2018, by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d.

"We could see the storm coming in on radar. I was tracking it on my phone. And it looked like the worst of it was going to impact the east side of Panama City. I was able to track it until our power went out and I lost phone service. From then on, we were in the dark, literally."

While many people evacuated, a large percentage of the local population remained in the area. This left many residents, adults and children alike, exposed to the hurricane's terrifying and potentially traumatic effects.

"I can't tell you for sure how many, but I can say that a lot of people rode out the storm in their homes or were with neighbors or family in the area. I think a lot of people who might normally have evacuated for a Category Four or Five storm didn't. I think this was partially due to the storm being forecasted to be weaker than it was, the storm rapidly intensified at night while people were sleeping, and it was moving at a speed which didn't give people enough time to safely get out when they woke up in the morning."

Immediate Aftermath

When Hurricane Michael's wind and rain began to subside, survivors in Bay County and other surrounding communities started to come out of their shelters to find a changed landscape.

"When I finally got out and about, I couldn't even recognize places. I would drive by streets and when you would see something knocked over, it was almost like, 'Now, what was there?' Just shock and disbelief...I couldn't believe that this was the place I grew up in."

"My husband and I were [driving]...and I said, 'I told you I thought we should take Jinks Avenue.' And he's like, 'We're on Jenks Avenue.' And I said, 'We're not. We've lived here for [many years], and we're not on Jenks Avenue.' And it wasn't until I saw a particular business that I know is on Jenks Avenue that I was like, 'Oh my God, we're on Jenks Avenue!' I mean, I know that neighborhood like the back of my hand. But nothing looked familiar. It was like an alien planet."

Many experienced initial feelings of shock and disbelief.

"Number one word to describe it was that it was surreal. You almost felt like it wasn't really happening. You almost felt like it was something you see in a movie."

"When I went outside, I was devastated by what I saw...I was still like hyperventilating because I've never been in something like that before."

"Shocked. I couldn't breathe. Anxiety, anger. I was like, how in the heck could something like this happened to us? I remember, I probably said for weeks, 'No one's ever gonna believe this happened.' I mean, I lived in Guam, and we went through a super typhoon; and it did nothing like what Michael did. Michael was devastating...And then scared -- I was very scared for my kids. What's going to happen to them? They're upset because we didn't listen to them to go...I guess there's a little bit of relief because we lived through it, and I will say that we really didn't think there for a while we were going to make it."

Immediate needs such as shelter, water, food, medical attention, and safety were of paramount concern.

"The first thing we did, as soon as it was safe to go outside, was try and find a place to stay for the night because we didn't know if there was more of the storm coming. Our home was pretty much destroyed, and we knew we couldn't stay in

there...So while it was still light out, we went around our neighborhood to see if we could find someone who would let us spend the night."

As news of the damage began to filter out, those who evacuated worried about how their loved ones, neighbors, and property fared during the storm.

"I was glad we weren't there, but I was also freaking out about the house and my parents who stayed behind. We were far away and literally couldn't do anything to help at that point. I wanted to go home right away, but we couldn't."

"I was obsessed with looking at all of the pictures, like in videos, because I was far away and I just didn't know. I couldn't find anything about my neighborhood."

"We were watching the news and listening on the radio...I did start to get some text messages from different teachers...and then I got a message from our secretary who was trying to get in touch with everybody and make sure everybody was okay...So there were different pieces of information coming in. But it wasn't until Friday that we got a message from our next door neighbor...At this point we really didn't know what was going on with our house or anything...And then somebody else was able to send me some pictures of the area and we could actually see what damage had been done to our home, our neighborhood."

In the initial hours and days after the hurricane, it was difficult to grasp the scope of what had occurred.

"We couldn't get past our own driveway. We had to crawl over trees and wade through floodwaters just to get to our neighbor's house. It was days before we could get out of our neighborhood. We knew it was bad where we were at but had no idea what the rest of the area was like."

"The hurricane impacted a large part of the surrounding area. Hurricane force winds went well inland. So many trees were down. We didn't know the extent of the damage until much later on. People were still being rescued out of their homes a week after the storm in some areas."

"We live on the beach side and it wasn't really bad here. We had a few shingles lost and had some fence damage. We didn't realize how bad it was on the other side of the bridge until we finally got over there. It was like a bomb went off. I couldn't believe it. It was like you drew a line and it went from very little damage to total destruction in less than a mile!"

As the true extent of the disaster began to come into focus, residents in Bay County and surrounding areas knew there would be a long recovery ahead.

“When I started seeing some videos and [pictures] emerge, I was really shocked. I couldn't believe it. But honestly, even seeing all of that on TV and online, it still did not prepare me for the first time I rolled up and actually, visually saw it. In a picture, you just can't see the magnitude of it all; seeing all the destruction in that widespread of an area. I had no idea. I thought I understood it from what I saw in the pictures. But I realized I didn't until I saw it firsthand. So, yeah, I was definitely shocked.”

But before people could worry about the future, they had to focus on more immediate concerns.



An elementary school near Tyndall Air Force Base suffered major damage from the hurricane. Every school and work site had some damage from the storm. From Hurricane Michael 2018, by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d. (<https://www.weather.gov/tae/HurricaneMichael2018>). In public domain.

Challenges Right After the Storm

In the wake of Hurricane Michael, the sheer amount of devastation, and with it the vast amount of need, brought an enormous set of challenges to the school district and surrounding communities. Some challenges were evident almost immediately after the storm.



“People needed help. They needed food. They needed fresh water. They needed a safe place to stay. They needed dry clothes. And it was really dangerous right after the storm. There was no power anywhere. No phone service. Roads were blocked. And there was dangerous debris all over the place.”

One of the first challenges for residents was addressing the destruction of homes, trees, and utilities (Starling, 2018a).

Other challenges would surface later on.

“Heading into the storm, we felt so powerful at that time. Like we felt so good about our work, our plans. The schools really felt like they had so much traction and positive things were going on. And since the storm, it really feels like we have been surviving in a way. That we almost can’t even do any of [those] things that we used to do...It almost feels like we can’t hardly get past the basic needs, that survival, in order to do the things that make us proud as a school district, because right now, we’re in survival mode.”

Like most people experiencing a disaster on the scale of Hurricane Michael, BDS administrators had limited experience to fall back on, even though they had been through previous storms.

“We’d been through many hurricanes before – even major ones like Opal and Dennis. But there is nothing like a Category 5. Michael was something like we’ve never before experienced. It was a whole other level.”

Regardless, BDS administrators were confident that the school district and surrounding communities would rise to the occasion and overcome any challenges that arose as they recovered from the storm.

“We knew some of the things that we would have to deal with. And we knew there would be things that would come up that we didn’t know about ahead of time. But I knew in my heart, that despite how bad things looked, that we would overcome any obstacles thrown our way.”

But where to start?

“If you think about it as a whole, it’s beyond overwhelming. But when you start to dissect it into pieces, and just start moving forward, little by little, it’s doable. Every win gets you a step closer to normal.”

To begin with, the district had some immediate challenges to overcome in the initial days and weeks after the storm.

The screenshot shows the NPR website interface. At the top left is the NPR logo. To the right are links for NEWSLETTERS, SIGN IN, and NPR SHOP. Below this is a navigation bar with categories: NEWS, CULTURE, MUSIC, PODCASTS & SHOWS, and SEARCH. The main content area features the word 'NATIONAL' above the article title 'Hurricane Michael's Damage To Communications Systems Has Slowed Recovery'. Below the title is the date 'October 22, 2018 · 4:45 PM ET' and the text 'Heard on All Things Considered'. A small profile picture of Debbie Elliott is shown next to her name. A blue button with a play icon and the text '3-Minute Listen' is prominent. To the right of this button are icons for '+ PLAYLIST', a download icon, a double arrow icon, and a menu icon. Below the button, the article's lead paragraph is visible: 'Residents in the Florida panhandle are still reeling from the destruction caused by Hurricane Michael. The recovery effort continues to be marred by fractured communication systems.'

Hurricane Michael’s damage to communications systems made the recovery efforts slow (Elliott, 2018).

Communication Post-Storm

Communication was one of the school district's most significant challenges right after the storm.

"There were no communications...the phone lines and everything else were out. In fact, [a work colleague] came over to the house to check on me."

"The storm took everything down – our cellphones, our TV, our cable, our radios. I felt really isolated because I couldn't communicate with anyone. I knew things were bad, but I had no idea how bad. I couldn't get past my own driveway."

The school district expected disruptions to communications. But the storm caused much more damage to infrastructure than anyone had anticipated.

"We had been through storms before and so we knew that the some of the cellphone towers and other infrastructure was going to be damaged. We knew that going in. But we never thought that pretty much everything would be completely wiped out. Even our district radios were inoperable."

"Verizon was the main carrier here in our area. And their network went completely down. I mean completely, for over a month. It was scary because the 9-1-1 system was tied to it, and so that wasn't functioning. The only cellphone service that was working was from AT&T. What AT&T did, which was smart, was they brought in these portable towers and that helped a lot."

"Only one out of our three local radio stations was working. The other two were knocked out."

Communication is a critical component to disaster response.

"I was literally at the point where I felt helpless because I'm like, 'I want to help, but I can't even help.' We had no phones; no electricity; no way to communicate. I had my radio that the school district gave us, but it wasn't working. And so, it's like, 'Okay, what am I going to do now? Just sit here and wait?' Because we couldn't talk to anybody and they couldn't talk to us."

BDS leadership knew that they had to find ways to communicate with their employees and the broader community.

“In my mind, the public radio broadcasting system was the best mode of communication at that time. They were doing live radio shows and then recording and repeating them...So the second day I got up to the EOC, [and] for about a week did radio shows to talk to people. It was amazing how that word got spread out...I had more people tell me they listened to me on the radio because we didn't have cell phones; we didn't have computers. So, I knew it worked.”

“Public radio was stationed at the EOC, and they were one of the few that were able to broadcast. So the Superintendent and I made a habit of every single day going on public radio to communicate with the whole community. At times I did the messaging if it was too difficult for him to get to the EOC. [Sometimes] I would [record] a message on my phone and then I would go sit at the public radio and play this message into the microphone...Public radio was really huge for us.”

The district made the most of their limited opportunities to communicate.

“On one of the first [messages] that I sent out to our employees, I said, ‘Look, don't worry. Everything's gonna be fine...Your pay is going to continue. You will get your check as you normally would. Don't worry about that.’ And so many people come up and told me, ‘Man, it was so good to hear that you were doing that. We're grateful for that and it meant a lot.’ We were just trying to be there and reassure people that, you know, all is not lost. We'll overcome this even though we got challenges. As time went on, people started believing in that because we were sharing that message. We all knew it was not gonna be easy, but they knew we were working hard to make it happen.”

BDS leadership relied heavily on public radio and subsequent word of mouth to organize their first meeting after the storm.

“I decided to set up a meeting a few days after the hurricane at Mosley High School. I chose Mosley because it's kind of in the middle, and it was off one of the major roads which I knew they were clearing. So, we said, ‘If you are an administrative Bay District School employee, we're gonna meet at Mosley on whatever day. And I think we set it up around 11am or Noon because you couldn't get places so easily. It took an hour or two just to drive a few miles.”

“[My husband] was riding around and he comes back and he said, ‘You have a meeting tomorrow at Mosley High School.’ And I said, ‘How do you know that?’ And he said, ‘The Superintendent was on the radio and he needs all of his

leadership at Mosley High School.’ So, it was at that point that we knew, ‘Okay, we had a mission to get there.’ And that was really the only communication that we had.”

With most means of communication down, district leaders had to get creative in finding ways to get messages out.

“We were able to use banner planes to effectively share information...I would [recommend] keeping a file on who flies banner planes and keep their contact information handy.”

“We were able to put out a lot of messaging through variable message boards...I would recommend knowing [ahead of time] who in the community has variable messaging boards. I had three at the district, the county had nine.”

“We made flyers, and we were able to distribute those at the Points of Distribution through the National Guard. But I didn't know which of my schools had the high-capacity onsite copiers, so that kind of delayed me a little bit. I had to try to figure that out. We had to handle all that in-house because obviously there were no Kinko's Copy Centers that we could send stuff to...If I had to do it over again, I would know which of my schools have high-capacity copiers and printers.”

BDS leadership purchased burner phones that were connected to AT&T once they realized that the phone carrier's network was still operational in some areas. T-Mobile also donated phones for the district to use.

“Some people's phones worked. If they had Verizon, they were dead. But AT&T worked...So my board chair went over to Fort Walton and bought like 100 Cricket phones, and we started giving them out to everybody that was coming to our meetings so we could communicate with them.”

“Mr. Husfelt, the Superintendent, and one of the board members got us burner phones through AT&T. We were able to actually communicate through the burner phones. But before that, we had to drive back and forth to Mosley High School every day just so we could talk and plan.”

The rush to get the burner phones out resulted in a little problem.

“We never envisioned having absolutely no communication. We got burner phones after the fact. But we didn't make a list of the phone numbers before we

handed them out. So a bunch of us had phones, and we had no idea what the other person's phone number was...So, we learned that we should have had a master list of phone numbers to hand out to everybody."

The district learned first-hand how valuable phone access can be during times of disaster. Building upon this lesson learned, BDS is now better prepared to deal with cellphone outages than they were prior to Michael.

"I now have two cell phones on two different carriers. I also keep a burner phone in my truck."

"We bought fifteen satellite phones, so we have a core group that will always have satellite phones available. And we have a list of phone numbers already in place. And then we know that we will need a contract for burner phones if a hurricane like that ever happens again. So, the phone was a big deal."

As other communication pathways slowly started to come back, the district relied more heavily on the internet as a means of communication.

"I was able to access the internet at the EOC as part of my function as one of the County's [Public Information Officers]. I was able to leverage that and use it to communicate with our staff. I was able to send out an email every single day with all of the latest information on things like, 'Do you need a tarp on your roof? Do you need help with a generator? Are you missing gas? Are you looking for ice? Are you looking for food? Are you looking for public phones to call your loved ones?' Whatever they were looking for...It didn't get to all of the people because they didn't have internet access, but for those that could get it, people were comforted by the fact that we, as a school district, we're trying to help them. We were trying to connect them with resources...Once people had access to their email, I got so many emails from people that were like, 'I got a roof on my house because of an email you sent. I had the disaster relief people come because of an email you sent. I would never have known.' Because they weren't watching TV, they didn't have TV, they didn't have power. So, they didn't know about a lot of community resources."

"Communication is absolutely critical. And for all the detractors of Facebook, and there are days when Facebook just makes me want to bang my head against the wall. It was invaluable because a lot of people could connect to us on Facebook, and we were able to push out information."

However, BDS quickly hit a roadblock to using social media platforms due to two-factor authentication.

“From a social media standpoint, I didn’t know before the storm that you can go in ahead of time to Facebook and download some codes. Because what happens when you have the two-factor authentication on your Facebook account, is when you try to log in from unfamiliar devices, it shuts you down. And constantly after Hurricane Michael, I was logging in from unfamiliar devices. I was logging in from anybody who had a connection...So I ran into some serious glitches with that whole process with Facebook. And I didn’t know beforehand that you can download a set of codes. I think you can download up to ten codes, so that will get you through ten times of using a different device, but then maybe can connect and get ten more.”

Thanks to the hard work of district staff and partners in the community, BDS was eventually able to open and maintain a number of effective communication channels with employees and the broader community. This led to the district becoming a central and important source of information for many across the county. It also led to the district becoming a central figure in the recovery effort, beyond just education.



Hurricane Michael damages the local infrastructure, including this church in Callaway. (Photo is public domain.) (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.)

Handling Donations

As a focal point for information, the school district was in a position to identify people with needs and connect them with resources.



Due to the lack of available housing, hundreds of residents moved into a “Tent City” in an open field for shelter (Starling, 2018c).

“I think it was an opportunity for our employees to see us as something other than just an employer. We were like, ‘Housing, do you need housing? Let us find someone who will take you into their home.’ And so, I was literally matching people...I had this database of about five hundred people that needed homes and the people that were willing to take people into their homes...And I was like, ‘Who can take someone with three kids? Oh, you can take somebody with three kids!’ And off they’d go. So, those kinds of things we were able to do for our employees in the beginning when we couldn’t do anything else. ‘Can we fix your school? We can’t do that, but what I can try to do is find you some place to sleep tonight and, working with Mercy Chefs, find you somewhere you can eat.’ I mean, just the very basics.”

BDS soon found itself as a critical link to supporting the basic needs of many individuals and families after the hurricane.

“First in the hearts of our school system was taking care of the kids, making sure that they had their basic needs met. After the storm, I remember one of our principals saying every day some of the kids needed a new blanket, because every day when they came home their blankets were wet because of the holes in their roof. So, you know what we’re going to do? We’re going to give them a blanket every day. If that’s what it takes, that’s what we’re going to do.”

Part of this role involved the school district serving as a de facto donation center as unsolicited donations started pouring in from all over the country.

“It was incredible...just the sheer amount of donations that came through Bay District Schools...the amount of clothes and shoes and supplies.”

“We were inundated with stuff from well-meaning people who totally wanted to help...I quickly put together with the help of some friends a team of about thirty women who would come to the warehouse every day and organize the donations. We had our own mini-Walmart or mini-Target going in that warehouse.”

“[We] were great at getting the resources out there as soon as we could, what our people needed. And it could be anything from mattresses to household appliances to clothing to gift cards to help with their roofs. We were a one-stop shop for our employees and for a lot of our students.”

“We were doing a little bit of everything for our employees and our students. It was fun to watch that process because there was so much giving going on, so many donations and so many helping hands. It was fun to watch the community and the world help.”

All the donations brought about a new set of challenges.

“How to handle people’s generosity was something that had to be navigated, and we didn’t know. You just don’t know until you’ve been through it.”

Storage capacity quickly became an issue.

“Stuff is a blessing, but stuff is also a curse. Because you have to have somewhere to put it. And people were contacting us saying, ‘We’ll send you two pallets full of mattresses.’ Well, right at the beginning, I’m like, ‘Please don’t. I don’t have anywhere to put them.’”

“Eventually there were some schools that were like, ‘We literally don’t have a place to put anything else. We are overwhelmed. We don’t know what to do with this.’”

Logistics was also a significant challenge in the beginning.

“We just weren’t ready initially to handle the logistics of it all. You know, we were used to getting donations on a smaller scale. But we weren’t ready for the massive amount of things that were coming in. And combine that with all the

damage and destruction from the storm. Where were we gonna store all this stuff and how were we gonna get it distributed?"

"You could have brought us fifty pallets of roofing supplies. We had nowhere to put them, and we had no way to distribute them. It took like a month for that piece to come along. So, stuff is a curse in the beginning."

"I think that people who haven't been through it don't understand the transportation challenges at the start...Some people don't have cars that they can use to come and get things. And you can't drive on the streets because you're going to blow a tire because there's roofing nails everywhere."

The district quickly learned that not all donations are helpful – and not all donations should be accepted.

"From the very beginning, at the EOC, a Volunteer Florida guy told me, 'Don't take used stuff.' He said, 'You'll still get it, but don't take it. Don't advertise for it.' It was probably the best advice I got."

"One time, someone brought us snow boots. And we're like, "Oh, well, we appreciate your generosity." What are we going to do with snow boots? Like, that doesn't help us, you know."

Handling donations that are not needed is a bit tricky but can be navigated gracefully. Acknowledging people's offer to help while explaining why something is not needed or what items would be of better use can go a long way in not alienating donors.

"Certain things are needed and other things just are not...While everybody's generosity was greatly appreciated, we had to turn around people who, out of the goodness of their heart, had cleaned out their closets and wanted to donate used clothes to us. We had to be like, 'Thank you so much, but this is what we're accepting at this time and this is what we're not accepting.'"

Messaging can also help people understand how they can best assist.

"When we finally got power and internet, we were able to get in front of it better. We were able to get messages out about the things we needed versus the things we didn't need. I think that helped."

"We put out the message that we were only taking new items, nothing used – and only things that we could sort."

“Our school put together a ‘wish list’ of items that our students, families and teachers still needed. It was kind of like a registry that people do for their weddings. That was super helpful because people interested in donating to us could just choose from that list and send us what was needed instead of just randomly sending things we couldn’t use. And they could see what items were already donated and what we still needed. So that was very helpful.”

In addition, the district found it helpful to keep track of needed items.

“We had an organization contact us and ask us what we needed. They wanted to donate items and they wanted to make sure those items were actually going to be used. We were able to quickly provide them a list of classroom resources that we needed and, sure enough, they got us everything we asked for. That was awesome. And the teachers and students were so appreciative.”

District staff worked very hard to get the much-needed resources to the children and families as quickly as possible. Having an organized effort helped ensure that the items got to the people who needed them most.

“Throughout the country, people were helping us out and sending supplies to us, doing school supply drives and clothing drives and food drives. And I think Bay District Schools did a great job of helping with housing those items, assisting the food drives, organizing them, getting that information out to our parents, and then getting the supplies out to them, too.”

“BDS did an amazing job of getting those clothes, food, water, blankets and other items out to our families. It was great to see how it all happened given all the destruction. I know the district staff was hurting like the rest of us, but they really did what they could and it was so appreciated. It made a difference.”

With communication channels slowly coming back online and donated items starting to arrive and be distributed, BDS leadership focused their attention on perhaps the most daunting challenge they faced in the early weeks after the storm – figuring out how they were going to reopen the schools.

Reopening Schools

The reopening of schools typically marks a significant milestone in a community's recovery after a disaster. However, reopening schools is more than just a symbolic event.

"We realized that schools had to be open. We were not going to get back together as a functioning society until the schools could open... We also knew, mentally; everybody wanted to have some semblance of normalcy."

"With all the devastation and craziness, the kids needed a safe place to be. They needed some structure and some familiar routines. They needed to see their friends and their teachers."

"The community couldn't go back to work until the kids went back to school, so they needed us to help our community move forward."

While reopening the schools was something district employees and the broader Bay County community looked forward to, everyone realized it was not going to be an easy task given the catastrophic devastation caused by the hurricane.

"We had several schools and parts of buildings that were completely decimated."

"The storm took the roof off of our biggest building, and it set it back down -- but not exactly straight. And it did some other structural damage. Our building looked great from the outside. People would drive past and go, 'Oh, you guys dodged it!' But none of the classroom space was usable."

"We didn't get back into [the Nelson Building] building for I would say at least a month. It was just totally messed up. I mean, all this was just really bad. Even today, three years later, there's still a lot of damage needing repairs here."

The district had many challenges to overcome and different variables to consider.

"Where do we start? How are we going to get school started back again when we don't know what's even available? Like, when are we going to have power? When are we going to have water? So, you know, there were a lot of conversations."

"The challenge was, do you worry more about your budget or do you worry more about what you need? I knew we had \$100 million dollar insurance policy. We didn't have the check, but I knew we had insurance. We knew we needed much

more than that, but it was something. So we just did what we had to do and trusted the system was going to work and help us.”

“In just getting school back, you had to figure out how you were going to do it. You had fewer buildings. You had fewer students. But you didn't know where the fewer students were, so it wasn't like you could all of a sudden rezone and send kids different places. And the housing projects were all decimated.”

“I was very concerned about our students that don't deal well with transition in a typical environment, [such as] our students with significant cognitive disabilities, our students that were on the autism spectrum and our students with significant behavioral disabilities. Those are the first three populations that I thought of because of my understanding of their difficulty with any type of disruption or transition. So, trying to provide and make sure that their needs were going to be met once we could resume school, making sure that we had related service providers that were available to support our students' needs and the medical care that was involved.”

One major hurdle the district had to deal with was centered on childcare.

“One of our biggest problems was there were no daycares...I mean, zero childcare facilities opened up. And so that was huge because many of our employees have children...We have a lot of young people that work for us at every level, and they didn't have anywhere for their children to go so they could come to work...We found out that FEMA would pay for that daycare. So we opened daycares in our schools [and] that took a huge burden off many of our employees.”

“We had other industries want to know if we could take their kids as well. And we couldn't. FEMA would only pay if it was just for us. And so that was a major problem in getting the community to recover. There was not enough daycare for everyone so the adults could help with the cleanup and go back to work. [Even] today, we still don't have enough childcare, daycare facilities. That's a national problem, not just ours. But ours was exponentially exacerbated by the hurricane.”

There was also a question of “when” to reopen the schools. On one hand, there was a lot of pressure to open the schools as quickly as possible. On the other hand, BDS leadership was aware that opening the schools too quickly could have negative consequences on their employees.

“One of our trainers talked about Miami opening some of their schools too early after Hurricane Andrew and how that was actually detrimental to their students and employees. People need time to process what happened. People need time to get their lives back in order. I know a lot of people wanted to open quickly, but that’s not always best for the long-term health of employees and students.”

“You know, there was some second-guessing. In fact, we had [an employee] come to a board meeting [where] we announced the plan we had for staggered openings. And [the employee] was crying, ‘Please don’t. We’re not ready. We’re not ready yet.’...But I don’t recall any emails after we started opening telling us, ‘Hey, you opened too soon.’...I knew that we couldn’t all just sit home forever. We were not going to get anywhere where we were. We had to go forward.”

BDS leadership, in conjunction with community partners, began to formulate a reopening plan.

“So we started having these meetings with the goal of coming up with a plan on how we were gonna reopen. We had to figure out what steps needed to be taken and in which order. And who we needed to speak with and coordinate with.”

“Gulf Power was brought in, and we were like, ‘When do you think we’re going to have power?’ And they asked us which schools we wanted to prioritize. So, we had to figure that out.”

The first step was to determine the extent of the damage at each school. The district’s Facilities Department took a lead role in this effort. Every building was extensively surveyed.

“The infrastructure was the main focus we had to figure out first and we moved on from there...Facilities got out to see what was damaged, what was destroyed and what was still usable.”

The damage assessment helped the district prioritize which campuses to reopen first, second, and so on.

“We got with [our Facilities Director] and figured out which schools could be opened and when...There were obviously buildings that couldn’t be used ever again. But most of them we could use again with some work. The schools over in [Panama City] Beach were fine. But we still had people in some of the schools which were being used as shelters.”

But there were more than just infrastructure concerns to consider in determining which schools to reopen and when. Other factors also had to be taken into account.

“We opened schools based on how well the schools could be operated and functioning in addition to how long it would take to deal with the damage.”

“Part of the challenge was we had to get the transportation issues down pat before we could open a school. We did it, but it was definitely a team effort.”

“We had massive cleanup and other things that had to be done before we could open any schools...We hired professional cleanup crews. These big companies came in and, you pay a big price, but it's amazing what they're able to do.”

The district had to plan for the students and staff whose campuses were heavily damaged or destroyed in the storm. Some schools were merged while other campuses utilized a split schedule.

“Due to extreme damage to five of our school facilities and one of our high schools continuing as a shelter after school resumed, our secondary schools had to split sessions to share space. High school students attended from 7 a.m. to noon with middle school attending at the same facilities from 1-6 p.m....The three elementary schools were each combined with a less damaged elementary school with space.”

Figuring out how to make these changes work successfully was one of the biggest logistical challenges to reopening.

“We started looking at, ‘Okay, if we do this, then which students would we have come in the morning, and which students would we have come in the afternoon? High school plays a lot of sports, right? And so, they needed to practice in the afternoon. So, they should come to school in the mornings, and middle school can come in the afternoon.’...And once we figured that out, we had to look at bussing and how we were going to get the kids to school and back, because bussing was going to be overlapping.”

“You had to weigh the safety challenges. Because we had kids getting on the bus before daylight, with mounds of debris surrounding them; and junk on the side of the road. It wasn't like there was a clear path for many of the kids to walk to a bus stop. They had to walk around things like sharp metal objects and then stand between mounds of debris. And so, there was a huge safety concern about how we could get these kids to school safely. So, bus routes were adjusted and more pickup areas were added.”

Once BDS figured out the logistics involved with the mergers and split schedules, district and school administrators worked together to plan for the faculty and students returning to campus.

“Once we had an idea of which campuses were to be used, then it was figuring out how we were going to get the students back. So we all broke out into our different departments and started planning with principals and with school leaders.”

Part of the reopening plan involved providing emotional support and allowing time for the students and staff to reconnect and process their experiences as they arrived back on their campuses.

“The first thing was trying to make sure that all of our folks were safe. We tried to get everybody back. I remember the first time we were all here, it was very emotional. We gave our people the time that they needed to love on one another and hug one another. Some people really needed to share their stories. People just wanted to talk about what they had been through.”

“We made sure we had counselors assigned to be at the schools when they opened. DOE was very helpful in providing us with a number of volunteers who came from outside Bay County to help us in that regard. We were so appreciative.”

For some youth with special needs, the changes to their environment and normal school routines caused a lot of stress.

“I think that was the first thing they noticed was that the things they usually look at on the wall, such as technology screens, were not there, And so that was very upsetting. They would point and scream and run to a corner. They were upset that they couldn’t do their routine.”

BDS leadership knew academics would have to take a back seat for a while.

“Academics and student support/mental health are two sides of the same coin. If we want the best from our students academically, then it starts with healthy students who are fully present and able to be their academic best. The barrier to this is that [it] is often seen as two separate coins, in two separate silos, as far away from each other as possible. When principals and our district are judged on school grades, then it is difficult for some to find the time in the day to meet the mental health and other non-academic needs of students. It is academics first, last, always. With the Superintendent's support, we continue to problem-solve

and find opportunities where we can integrate the necessary supports into the student's day which ultimately benefits the academics and school grades.”

District leadership made it clear that it was okay for the schools to focus on the psychological needs of the students and staff when the schools reopened.

“We told [the schools]. ‘Look, for the first few days, just let them talk. Just let the kids talk and tell you what's going on with their lives. They need to be around each other. We're not looking for you to give them tests and quizzes. Just let them have fun. They just needed to have that time.”

“My focus was not on returning to the curriculum. It was getting my kids' needs met...it's the importance of relationships, the importance of and focus on mental health and how people cope and deal with significant disruptions or loss.”

“There were several schools that had to close and merge together. And so, I think that for staff, and for administration and students and parents, it was probably stressful to go into this brand new environment. It wasn't their comfort zone. And for many students, it wasn't necessarily with the teachers or staff that they knew.”

Student Support Services took a lead role in readying the campuses to support the social and emotional needs of returning students.

“The next thing was just getting into action for what the schools were going to need, and it was a lot of mental health and social emotional learning resources. We knew that students weren't in a place to get back to business. Academics were not top priority. And so all of that falls to Student Services. And it was like, ‘Okay. This is our wheelhouse. This is what we need to get out there.’ And we just got to work on developing digital resources for those who did somehow have internet access and then a lot of hard copy binders and resources with information on how administrators, classroom teachers and parents could support the kids...We just had to get back to the basics and really think about what they could benefit from.”

Looking back, Student Services staff learned that it would have been helpful to have had material prepared ahead of time.

“Having some of those resources ready, whether it's on a shared Google drive or in some binders in a storage closet somewhere would have been ideal to be prepared for those situations. Like, having a bank of those resources ready to be delivered at a moment's notice.”

The district decided it was best to reopen the schools in waves.

“We decided to open up the schools in three different waves...We did it in waves because some schools were clearly going to be ready before others.”

Everyone worked incredibly hard to get the schools ready for reopening.

“I can't say enough about our employees, our Facilities department, Maintenance department, the companies. Everyone worked hard to get things done to bring some normalcy back.”

“Several school districts from south and central Florida sent maintenance crews to us for weeks at a time. [They were a] huge help!”

Even some residents living adjacent to the schools offered their support.

“Everybody in the community was helpful. People that own property near us, you know, we got permission to do things we never thought we'd have to do. But it was a challenge, and so everybody got involved...There was a large presence of, ‘We've got to do things we don't want to do, but we have to do to help people.’ So that was a good thing to watch and a good process where everybody got to be involved.”

BDS successfully opened their first wave of schools almost a month after the hurricane. It was an incredible feat.

“Within four weeks after the hurricane we opened the first wave of schools. Then we had a second wave, and then we had a third wave. People saw that we were trying to do the best we could.”

Once the schools started reopening, it became apparent that the mergers and split scheduling were going to take some getting used to. There were difficulties fitting everyone together in a shared space.

“There were challenges with faculties sharing space, with students sharing space. For example, Merritt Brown and Mosley teachers shared spaces. And so, you had Mosley teachers worried about the [Merritt Brown] teachers and kids using their classrooms. You know, ‘Are my things being taken care of?’ So, there were a lot of team-building activities as well as flexible schedules. If [Mosley] teachers were in their classrooms until noon, and then the middle school was coming in at 1 p.m., then we let the [Mosley] teachers have some flex time where they could

finish their day at home, so the middle school teachers could come in. There's a lot of logistics to work out when you're sharing spaces like that."

"I had friends at other middle schools that were stacked with high schools that had experiences that were very unpleasant. There were some classroom teachers that had it very difficult because they couldn't get into the rooms when they wanted. There was nowhere for them to store stuff; the room wasn't set up the way they wanted. It was because it wasn't their classrooms. They were sharing it with another teacher."

School counselors played a significant role in helping students, staff, and families cope with these changes.

"All of these accommodations caused difficulties for students, staff, and families. There were many emotions that came as a result of these school closures and changing schools. There was anger from those who had to move to a new school and sometimes anger from those students who had not been personally impacted by the storm, but now there were many changes occurring and new students arriving with many needs. School Counselors were in the midst of trying to assist with these transitions, providing emotional support to all involved."

In spite of the challenges, the split scheduling worked for a time ... until the "time" changed.

"You say, 'Okay, that's a good plan. That's gonna work.' Well, that worked fine until the time changed. And then all of a sudden, we were taking kids home at six o'clock at night in the dark, and there were no streetlights, and there was dangerous debris everywhere. Plus, many of them lived in rural areas to begin with."

The challenge presented by the fall time change was another lesson learned by the district.

"It was something that we did because we didn't have many options at the time.... It really worked. It did what we needed it to do. But I would never do it again unless it was an emergency situation."

"I would not do the middle school thing as we did. We would come up with another way to avoid that nighttime getting them home like that. I'm not sure what that would look like, but we would do something different than that."

BDS also learned that while there are many benefits to site-based administration, there can also be some drawbacks that may make it more difficult for some students to integrate into a new school after a disaster.

“A lesson learned from both the hurricane and the pandemic is that site-based administration is positive in some aspects, but then there’s some other sides to that where if you had unified, consistent implementation across the district, it would be advantageous, especially with classroom and behavior expectations. Like, if you had every school in the county implementing PBIS, it would be common language. So, if a kid had to move from one school to another now because they’re relocated after the hurricane or whatever disaster, they could pick up and be familiar with similar expectations and adjust quicker to that new school...Having some consistent practices in place would definitely work to their advantage for sure.”

The district did the best they could in reopening the schools given the tremendously difficult circumstances. While lessons were learned, BDS was successful in this mission. Having students and staff back in classrooms & was a major step forward and unofficially marked a new phase in the community’s recovery.

“It really was a monumental task. I can tell you that every person on the team, whether it was a district employee, a school level employee, an administrator, everybody did their part. Everybody pulled extra, and everybody wanted to be there for the students. That was the entire goal. We knew our kids needed food. We knew our kids needed safety. And instruction was going to occur when it could, but right then we had to get them back in school, had to get them safe,

and had to bring that connection back, because we knew that we needed them and they needed us.”

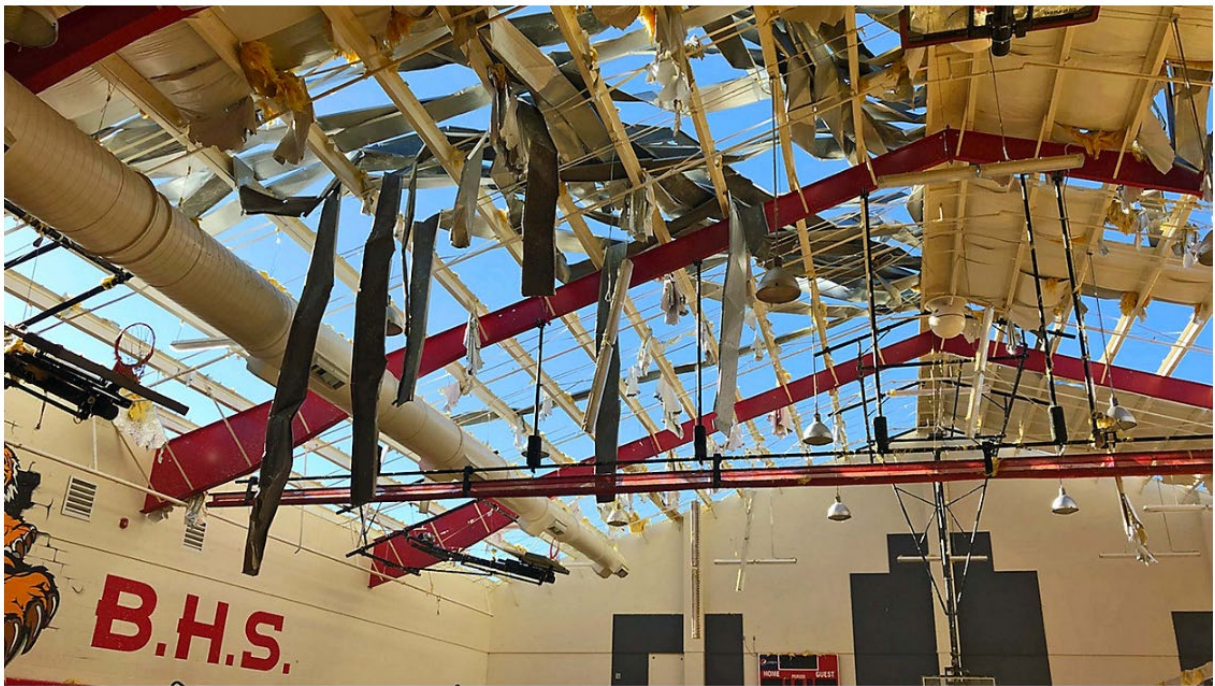
POST HURRICANE MICHAEL BAY DISTRICT SCHOOLS' CALENDAR 2018-2019

	Day	Month	Date
HURRICANE MICHAEL	Wednesday	October	10
Schools begin to reopen with various start dates	Monday	November	5
Veterans Day (Holiday for All)	Monday	November	12
Thanksgiving Holidays (School out entire week for Students & Teachers)	Monday	November	19
Thanksgiving Day (Holiday for all)	Thursday	November	22
Return from Thanksgiving Holidays	Monday	November	26
Christmas Holidays Begin	Monday	December	24
Return from Christmas Holidays	Monday	January	7
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Wednesday	January	9
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Thursday	January	10
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Friday	January	11
End of Second Nine Weeks/End of First Semester	Friday	January	11
Records Workday for Teachers (School Out for Students) - REGULAR SCHOOL DAY FOR ALL	Monday	January	14
Martin Luther King's Birthday (Holiday for All)	Monday	January	21
Teacher PLC Planning Day (School Out for Students) - REGULAR SCHOOL DAY FOR ALL	Wednesday	February	6
Presidents' Day (School Out for Students & Teachers) - REGULAR SCHOOL DAY FOR ALL	Monday	February	18
Spring Holidays Begin	Monday	March	18
Return from Spring Holidays	Monday	March	25
End of Third Nine Weeks	Thursday	March	28
Good Friday (School Out for Students & Teachers) - REGULAR SCHOOL DAY FOR ALL	Friday	April	19
Memorial Day (School Out for Students & Teachers)	Monday	May	27
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Wednesday	May	29
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Thursday	May	30
High School Testing Day - TESTING SCHEDULE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT EACH HIGH SCHOOL	Friday	May	31
End of Fourth Nine Weeks/End of Second Semester/ Last Day (FULL DAY) for ALL STUDENTS	Friday	May	31
Post Planning for Teachers	Monday	June	3
Post Planning for Teachers	Tuesday	June	4

Bay District Schools revised the school calendar for the 2018-2019 school year (Bay District Schools, 2018).



Bringing In Assistance



Damage to one of Bay County's schools after Hurricane Michael. (File)

Florida Panhandle Superintendent to Lawmakers: We Need Mental Health Dollars



BY SPECTRUM NEWS STAFF | FLORIDA
PUBLISHED 4:39 PM ET OCT. 30, 2019

Bay District Schools Superintendent requests mental health money to assist students traumatized from Hurricane Michael. From Florida Panhandle Superintendent to Lawmakers: We Need Mental Health Dollars, by Spectrum News 13, 2019 (<https://mynews13.com/fl/orlando/news/2019/10/30/florida-panhandle-superintendent-to-lawmakers--we-need-mental-health-dollars>).

Bringing In Assistance

Once the initial phase of the disaster settled down and immediate needs were for the most part addressed, the school district, like many Bay County residents, began to focus on the next phase of the recovery effort. While life was nowhere near back to normal, some semblance of what the community was like before the storm began to reappear. A number of restaurants and stores began to reopen; power and internet were becoming increasingly more available; school buses were traveling the roads again; and the sounds of construction echoed across many parts of the region.

“It was around Christmas time that I walked into my first store since Michael hit. It was just nice to walk into a clean place with all kinds of new stuff in it. I will never forget that feeling I had when I walked in because it was the first time since the hurricane that something seemed ‘normal.’ The store was how I remembered it. I was able to do a little Christmas shopping for my friends and family. It was just a nice break from everything.”

Recovering from a disaster is not a linear process. There are often many ups and downs.

“Before the hurricane, every once in a rare blue moon we would go out for our lunch breaks together as colleagues to one of our close favorite restaurants...So a few months after the hurricane, the one time we finally said, ‘Let’s make time and go out to lunch. Let’s just step away from it for an hour and go have lunch.’ And we get to our favorite restaurant, and no one had cash. And they were only taking cash. So, we go across the street to the ATM and the ATM wasn’t working. So our plan had backfired, and we couldn’t go out and have lunch. I remember getting so angry in that moment, like, ‘This hurricane ruins everything!’ You know? It was constantly lingering. Everything; all the impacts just lingered throughout that first year and even beyond.”

Sometimes it can seem that every step forward brings about a new challenge.

“We kept calling it ‘Hurricane Michael: the gift that keeps on giving.’ Because every time you think you’re finally getting to a better place, something else would come up.”

BDS leadership decided it would be beneficial to bring in experts to help navigate the recovery process.

“We knew that we needed to hire experts to navigate us through all those challenges and to deal with the response folks. I mean, not just anybody is a FEMA expert. Heck, FEMA experts aren’t even FEMA experts I found out.”

“Call some experts. Don't try to do it on your own. I don't know where we'd be without them.”

“I would say don't be afraid to hire a consultant like 7-Dippity, because if we didn't take on that help, if our superintendent and School Board didn't support us with securing that kind of help, I think we would have been far worse off. We couldn't do it alone.”

The help couldn't come fast enough.

“Don't hesitate to start looking for the experts. Don't hesitate looking for these professionals to help you and guide you to come up with a plan to help your people, because you're going to need it. And the quicker you put your plan together, the more likely it's going to have the impact you want it to have.”

Finding the right consultants took time. BDS leaders learned not to rush the process, even if there was an immediate need for this type of assistance.

“I did not know about how difficult the process to hire someone to guide us through the FEMA part was gonna be. There are bad actors out there with that. Just like there are bad contractors; there are bad 'consultants' and 'advisors.' It's a money, greedy situation. They flock to you like wolves, looking to devour you and get whatever they can. You know, there are a lot of good people, just like there are a lot of good contractors. But there are also a lot of bad ones.”

“I would say first of all, get a consultant you can trust. You need to vet them all really good. Don't just hire the first person that comes knocking on your door.”

“Maybe it's a matter of advocating that FLDOE lines up vetted [consultants] to be prepared and be put in place when school districts go through something like this. Because it was a huge learning process...You're going to need help and assistance. And you're going to need the RIGHT help and assistance.”

BDS eventually settled on utilizing the services of several different consulting firms, each with expertise in different areas of the recovery process.

“We brought in Hagerty Consulting to help us with FEMA and the government side; we brought in 7-Dippity to help us with the mental health side; and we brought in Ernest Cox to support the school counselors and our broader strategic

planning. They all have been amazing. And they worked well together, which was important because everything was so intertwined.

The district found the outside help invaluable.

"I think because you're so consumed in what's going on with your own personal life and the people around you, it's better to have an outside perspective. They'll help guide you on different avenues for funding; they know the right people to call. They have more time to spend on researching and applying for grants. They know the right people to have meetings with. They help you uncover every stone, where we didn't know where to start. So just having that outside perspective was so valuable because we didn't know who to call, what doors to knock on, what questions to ask. Having that help was instrumental throughout the whole thing."

"We were able to get connected to a lot of great resources through 7-Dippity during that time. We were able to network with a variety of folks that could do something that was feasible for our staff. [They] helped appropriate training for our staff...We would never have been able to find those resources otherwise."

The consultants provided an unbiased, experienced voice that was integral to decision-making.

"Hurricane Michael was particularly hard for me because it was my community, so I couldn't make decisions that weren't emotional because they were emotional first. Before they were logical, they were emotional."

Consultants were vital in helping BDS craft long-term recovery plans.

"We eventually were connected with 7-Dippity, who helped us with a lot of our communications. 7-Dippity helped us with a starting point, because all we kept saying is 'What do we do next?' And everybody kept saying, 'Well, what do you need? What do you want to accomplish?' And it was almost like we didn't even know where to start or what our next steps were."

The consultants also freed staff to concentrate on other important tasks that needed their attention.

"I still had to do my regular job in addition to the mountain of hurricane stuff. There was no way I could have done all of that by myself. Bringing in the [consultants] took a lot of that burden off and allowed me to focus on the things I had to focus on."

Peer Support

Another valuable source of support came from other school districts that had gone through a prior disaster.

“We found it very helpful to connect with administrators from other school districts who had experienced disasters in the past. They had already walked in our shoes and so had some great insights into how we could avoid some of the mistakes that they made in their recovery.”

It was beneficial for BDS staff to interact directly with these peers and hear about their experiences and lessons learned.

“We had all these folks from across the country share their perspectives from the tragedies that they experienced and what they lived through and what their lessons learned were. That was probably the most powerful thing. It was very helpful.”

FEMA helped facilitate this sharing of knowledge by setting up a workshop that brought together a number of individuals from other communities impacted by disaster.

“At one of the trainings, FEMA brought in folks from around the country to tell their stories and provide some lessons learned from disasters that they had gone through previously. Our administrators found that to be the most valuable workshop that FEMA brought to us.”

Some BDS administrators found the peer support so valuable that they offered to assist other school districts in the future.

“I told the folks at FEMA that they could count me in to help other districts who are hit by a disaster. I think that the lessons we learned are really valuable and can really help others who may go through something similar to what we went through. People came and helped us after Michael. I think it’s only right for us to pass that along and help others. Pay it forward.”

In addition to bringing in outside consultants and connecting with peers from other school districts, BDS also looked for support from partnering organizations, agencies, and individuals from the local community.

Community Partnerships

School districts rely daily on community partners to help support the academic and psychosocial needs of their students and staff. The resources, services, and other supports that community-based partners provide schools are immeasurable.

“We rely heavily on our community partners to support our students, families and employees. The partners that we have in the community here in Bay County are amazing! We love working with them. I can’t even begin to quantify the support that we’ve had from them over the years.”

Before Hurricane Michael, BDS had long-standing relationships with numerous community partners.

“Even before the storm we had existing relationships with a number of different community partners. Whether that was for academics or for fundraising or health or meals or sports or whatever. They really provided a lot of support to our schools.”

BDS had also recently established a new Community of Care system with several community partners just prior to the hurricane. This involved referring students in need of substantial mental health services to a community-based mental health provider.

“Right before the hurricane was when the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act had come into play. So we were already working with some of our community partners to an extent. We were in the very early stages of developing our Community of Care referral process, where we would refer students in need of a higher degree of mental health services than what we could provide in-house to a community-based provider.”

While community partnerships are helpful every day, they can become even more crucial when a disaster occurs. In the wake of Hurricane Michael, BDS learned that it needed to rely much more heavily on its community partners to support the students and staff.

“We had a couple of the community partners all lined up. But then after the hurricane, everything just exploded. And we were like, ‘Okay, we need all of you! Who’s available to help?’”

It was essential that the school district and community work closely together.

“We needed each other. There was no way around it. We were not going to do this alone. We needed our community partners to bring in resources and help us stand back up. And they needed us so they could access and support the kids and families and also get back to work.”

“The school district is a bedrock of the community. When the community is hit by a big hurricane, everyone is affected. The school district is, too. And, similarly, in order for the community to recover, everyone has to work together. We have to help each other out. The community cannot recover without the school district and the school district cannot recover without the community.”

BDS found that the hurricane provided an opportunity to establish new relationships and enhance pre-existing ones. The results of these efforts expanded the district’s network of community partners and brought in much-needed resources for the students, employees, and their families.

“I think more people met more people...I really feel like I know more people now from the hurricane than I did before the hurricane. I feel like our community came together more to support the schools because of the hurricane. It almost forced us to talk.”

“I would say the number of community partners that we had relationships with grew exponentially after the storm. And that’s saying a lot given the size of Bay County. Despite the hit that many folks took to their own businesses and organizations, they wanted to step up and help us. Plus, we established many new relationships with organizations from across the country.”

“If the door opened, I would walk into a meeting and introduce myself. And because the opportunity always came up where people asked, ‘How can we help you?’ or ‘How are you doing?’ It naturally grew into further conversation about what our needs were.”

While there were many positive outcomes with the enhanced community relationships, there were also some challenges.

“We did have a few organizations that wanted to take advantage of our position. They wanted access to the kids and families. And let’s just say it wasn’t always for altruistic purposes. Even though you need the help, you still have to be careful

about who you are working with. You still need to vet the organizations. You can't just let anyone and everyone who calls to help have access to the schools."

One significant and unexpected challenge to overcome became apparent a few months after the storm. Because the school district and community-based mental health partners had just started their Community of Care program, the kinks in the system had yet to be worked out when the hurricane hit.

"We were definitely not prepared for the sheer volume of [mental health] referrals that our schools were going to be making...So we did not have a system established that was sophisticated enough to track what happened once that referral was made...We didn't have the manpower to work with the community providers and they didn't have the manpower to work with us...We had a very difficult time getting a true picture of what was happening next once the referral was made. Have they responded? Have they connected to services? Have they had their first session? There was a lot of uncertainty about the numbers and what the follow-through was from the community providers."

The valuable lessons learned from overcoming this challenge apply to any school district that refers students to community-based providers for mental health services.

"Having that experience, I would recommend trying to get a system agreed upon before [the disaster occurs]. Not saying you have to jump right into a very thorough, legal memorandum of understanding, but that's exactly what it did lead to for us. Have transparent conversations. We started with monthly meetings. Bring those community partners in and have them be transparent about what the process is once you refer a child out to them. Learn what the workflow is. What do they do on their end? Learn their limitations – if they could just be honest and say, 'Hey, we're limited in this area. I'm not sure that we could take on any more student referrals.' It's important to have those types of upfront conversations. Yes, it's their business and it's their livelihood. But if they can't meet the needs of your students, then that's a problem. Agree upon a set amount of referrals. 'Okay, this is your cap. Once we refer you fifty students, we know you can't handle any more. We are going to go and start referring to another agency. And then, let us know when you do hire more staff and you're ready to take on more students.' Set those boundaries and parameters up front instead of just trusting that they're handling it accordingly."

A further challenge with some of the same community-based mental health partners arose when BDS acquired funding to hire directly a substantial number of mental health professionals in-house (see Triad Initiative on Page 109). In an area the size of Bay County, it was inevitable that some professionals employed by community partners would apply for positions within the

school district. This caused friction between some of the community partners and the school district.

“Because everybody was so community-oriented after that tragedy, everybody was willing to chip in and help. Everybody wanted to get their hands dirty and help the kids. But then business impacts that. When funding eventually did come through and we began advertising for district mental health staff, some of their staff would jump ship and come to us. And so then there was a little bit of friction between us and the community partners. We were still forced to work together because we knew we had to, but there was some resentment in the fact that we were, you know, taking their qualified folks to be employed by the district. It was a journey for sure.”

Despite these challenges, the district was able to work successfully with partners from across the community and maintain positive relationships with them.

“We had to have some heart-to-heart conversations with some of our community partners who were not so happy with us hiring some of their folks. The lesson here is that you have to be transparent and maintain communication. We were honest with them and explained our rationale for bringing some of the services in-house. It wasn’t for financial reasons. It was because we really wanted to do right for our kids and families – what they would get the most benefit out of. And I think the partners understood that after we talked. I really truly believe if you are honest with them and explain the ‘why,’ your relationships will turn out to be stronger in the end. Our goal is not to maintain these services forever. Eventually, they will return to the community partners. And now those partners have a much better understanding of what is expected of them. Everyone will benefit in the end.”

It was this combined effort that led to successful outcomes for many students, employees, and families after the storm.

“Only by working together were we able to help so many after the storm. We really are stronger together than separate. I know you hear that all the time, but it is the truth!”

“It was important to realize how many connections were made through this hurricane and how many opportunities we had to do better and to make things better...It was good to know that people have this district’s best interest at heart. And for me, it made me realize that I don’t have to figure this out by myself. Like, ‘we’ can. I think that’s one thing that I’ve learned.”



Resources

Taking Stock

Even with the assistance of consultants, peers, and community partners, the magnitude of the disaster was such that a considerable amount of additional resources were needed to support the longer-term needs of the students and staff. BDS administrators knew that they had to have a better understanding of what those needs were in order to address them. They also knew they could leverage the schools to gather that information.

“A recommendation I would give to other districts is definitely utilize your schools to gather as much data as you can on the impacts of the storm - whether that’s about the needs of students and their families; the needs of your staff; about damage in communities; impacts on mental health; whatever. You will need this information to make informed decisions. It may take an effort to get the information, but it is worth the investment. Don’t guess. Make informed decisions. These are people’s lives we are talking about.”

“We touch every child in our district – from age 6, which is the compulsory age, to age 16. We know who’s in homeschool. We know who’s in the charter schools. We know who’s enrolled in a regular district school. We touch every child – which then networks out to families, which then networks out to the community. And so having those children on our campuses, and our administrators hearing from those families on a daily basis what their needs and what their struggles are, means we can [gain] an in-depth understanding of where they are at and what they need. [After the storm], we had the opportunity to survey them. We had the opportunity to ask, ‘What else do you need?’ The schools had the opportunity through the teachers to find out where their classes were at with mental health and what other resources they needed. Things like, how many kids don’t have clothes? How many kids don’t have food? How many kids had their homes destroyed? To me, it just makes natural sense that you ask the school district first...you’ve got 26,000 kids in a district that are spread out and [you] can get to them and their families to get a pulse on where they are at.”

The consultants helped the district conduct a series of assessments so that they could better understand the psychological impacts the storm had on their students and employees.

“After our connection with 7-Dippity, they helped us to kind of pause and really take the first step of a comprehensive needs assessment of our people. And that was huge. Just getting that needs assessment really helped us identify and assess the level of stress, anxiety, and depression that our folks were going through. We knew it existed. We just didn’t know how great the need was or how vastly our staff members and our students and our families had been impacted. So that was a big step for us to get that completed and really use those results to drive our next steps; drive future decision-making.”

For example, in March and April 2019, five to six months after the storm, students and staff were assessed regarding their hurricane exposure and psychological functioning. The assessments indicated significant levels of post-disaster depression, anxiety and emotional trauma (see table below). It was important to note that over 38% of employees and 34% of students reported symptoms consistent with at least one psychological disorder. These results signified that more than 1 in 3 of every employee and student in BDS needed a higher level of service beyond what typical post-disaster crisis counseling programs could support.

BDS Assessment (March/April 2019)	Clinical Depression Symptoms	Clinical Anxiety Symptoms	Clinical PTSD Symptoms
Students	27.6%	20.6%	18.7%
Employees	33.2%	29.2%	15.6%

The findings from the assessments were instrumental in helping BDS leadership gain a true understanding of the mental health needs of the students and staff and what resources were required to address them.

“That data was eye opening. We knew some folks were struggling mental health-wise, but we didn’t know to what extent. That data helped drive our requests for resources, and I believe was a big reason why we were finally awarded funding to get mental health professionals in every school to help the kids.”

“We can guess where people are, but that mental health assessment [showed] we were struggling on the inside when maybe we didn’t show it as much on the outside.”

The district also surveyed community-based service providers to understand how they were impacted by the hurricane and what their capacity to provide services was after the storm.

“I think one of the best things that we did was doing that community provider assessment to find out where the community providers were at after the storm – and who was available to assist and who wasn’t available to assist. I think it was so important because it gave us a sense of what was available. We really didn’t know what our community providers could do for [the schools] after the storm...Their homes and businesses were destroyed. Their lives had also been turned upside down. And they already had their own caseloads. It turns out that our mental health providers in the community lost over 40% of their total capacity. Over 40%!!!”

“That was huge to me. I mean, when you say 40% of our community providers are gone, that’s another reason why we need people on the ground. And we found out that a lot of our kids and adults couldn’t get to the community

providers after the storm. So, that's why we needed people here in the schools, too."

The consultants also conducted numerous focus groups to gather feedback directly from administrators, educators, and parents.

"The focus groups were an important part of the information gathering process. We got to hear directly from our administrators and our educational and instructional support staff about what was really going on in the schools and what they really wanted. We couldn't accommodate every request, but we did the best we could. I think that went a long way in keeping us informed."

Collectively, the information from the assessments, surveys, and focus groups helped lay the foundation for the district's long-term recovery plans.

"We did a lot in tandem with getting the needs assessment completed. We were able to get appropriate training for our staff. It helped us identify weaknesses on our systems. It helped us establish a baseline for measuring progress after the storm...All kinds of things that were very needed. And it ensured that they were done in a proper way."

"We used all that data for any grant that we applied for. The superintendent also shared it with other superintendents across the state. He shared it with community members to [show] where the kids and where the adults the adults were at. It was used for lots of different purposes. It showed where we were at and what we were struggling with, and then [we] used it to build a plan for how we were going to address those challenges."

The information also helped administrators direct what limited resources the district had available at the time to those who needed them the most.

"We had only so much to work with; only so many school-based mental health professionals. It's not like we could wave a magic wand and bring in another two hundred folks to help overnight. That's exactly what we needed, but it wasn't going to happen. So we did our best with what we had at the time. And the psychosocial assessment helped us with that."

The data also confirmed what many BDS employees already knew – that the district was in dire need of additional resources to support the mental health needs of their students and staff.

“All those surveys clearly showed us what we were dealing with. We had a massive need for mental health services and nowhere near the capacity to address it. We knew things would quickly spiral out of control if we didn’t get the help we needed, and fast.”

The Hunt for Resources

BDS had an existing infrastructure for mental health services prior to the hurricane. But it was clear, based on the assessments and feedback starting to come in from the schools, the district was going to need considerably more resources to address the mental health challenges that were beginning to arise.

“The school district had a foundation for mental health support in place thanks to the state’s mental health allocation that was a result of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act. That allocation, and developing a plan of support for mental health across the district, gave us a starting place. But then our needs were so greatly exacerbated after the hurricane, we knew we were going to need more than just what that little allocation could do for us.”

“It wasn’t a secret. Everyone knew we needed way more help and resources than what was coming in. It was a trickle and we needed a tidal wave!”

Typically, outside agencies and organizations “push” resources into a community after a major disaster. However, as Bay County residents found out, this is not always the case.

“We were sandwiched between Hurricane Florence in the Carolinas and then the wildfires in California. So, we didn't get a lot of national attention. We didn't get a lot of the deep pockets that usually come in when something like a Hurricane Michael happens. If we had been the only thing that was going on at the time, I think we probably would have got more immediate assistance in aid. But we didn't.”

“We did not have the mental health support that is [typically] sent in from other states to come and help. I mean, the local mental health community was in shambles and lost basically everything – infrastructure and employees – just like the medical community. And so, we didn't have the extensive response that could have come in and provided the infrastructure for mental health during that time.”

With adequate resources not coming into the area, BDS leaders were forced to reach out for help.

“I knew we couldn't sit back and wait for the cavalry to arrive because it was clear they weren't going to. They would have already arrived by that point. We needed to be the ones to get out there and tell the world our story. We needed to start the conversation. We needed to go find and bring back those resources.”

BDS leaders soon discovered that navigating the disaster resource landscape can be extremely challenging. Unfortunately, there was no roadmap that would have assisted in this process.

“We had not been in this situation before. We didn’t know what was out there. We asked FEMA and the state for a list of agencies and organizations that could help us, and they kept saying none existed. They also said they would provide us with some ideas. But they never did.”

“There were things we had no idea about. Like what a SERV grant was. We didn't know what [grants] were available to help us.”

“None of the federal or state agencies told us anything about a RESTART grant or even what other funding sources were available for mental health or anything like that.”

To make matters worse, a number of representatives from various federal and state agencies and large Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) were not aware of all the potential resources available within their own entities, let alone what others had. This led to many circular and, at times, fruitless discussions.

“It was incredibly frustrating because these folks come in and sound like they know what they are talking about. You trust they know what they are doing because disaster work is their job. And they speak with confidence about how they can help and what they can offer you. And you believe them. And then it turns out that what they are telling you is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of how their agency or organization can help. It’s like they are reading you the appetizer part of the menu and leaving everything else out. Or, they are pushing some training or program that they are telling you that you need, but it turns out isn’t really a good fit for you. I don’t know if it’s a lack of training or laziness or they are trying to save money or what, but that’s gotta change. It has real implications. If you don’t know all the ways your agency can help, and you work for that agency, how the heck do you expect me to know?!?”

“There was no source of communication, I felt like, from the folks who run disaster management, whoever they are, DHS, FEMA, FDEM, the Department of Education, DCF. Everybody has their silo. But you don’t know what each group’s doing within the silo. And they don’t coordinate well with each other. They have no idea what the other groups are doing or saying. And then you have the same conversations over and over and over again with each of them separately. The whole process needs revamping.”

“We were trying to get more funding, more support to hire more mental health professionals; trying to get anything that we could to support the schools. All I can describe is that it was like going on a wild goose chase down a rabbit hole. Every day I felt like we were going down a rabbit hole. We would talk to somebody, and they would ask us, ‘Have you talked with your managing entity yet?’ And I would say, ‘Yes, we have.’ [Big Bend Community Based Care] was our managing entity. And they were already helping us with every resource they possibly could. So, every time we spoke to someone it was getting us frustrated. ‘Oh, did you try talking to your managing entity?’ ‘Yes. Yes we have. They have given us everything they possibly could.’ It was the same conversation over and over again.”

Resources are vital in shaping how, and how quickly, a community recovers from a disaster. BDS leaders knew that obtaining the needed resources in a timely manner was critical to ensuring the district and the community at large were on the right track for recovery.

“Schools are an important part of bringing your community back. [And] the quicker we get to the students that need help and the employees that need help, the quicker the recovery is and the less stress they’ll go through in their lives.”

Obtaining the right resources in a timely manner after a disaster requires a team effort. All parties involved need to be on the same page and working together. Communication is vital toward this goal. From a school district’s perspective, this means being able to identify accurately and clearly communicate needs. From a funder’s or intermediary’s standpoint, this means gaining an understanding of what those needs are and what resources can be best utilized to address them. This is not always such a straightforward process. Early on in the recovery effort, asking BDS leaders open-ended questions about what they wanted was not the best way to determine what the school district’s needs were.

“One of the most difficult things was when we would first get DHHS in here and DCF in here and all of those disaster folks, and they would say, ‘Tell us what you need.’ It became very frustrating because we didn’t know what we needed. Like, I don’t know. I’ve never done this before; never been through a Category 5 hurricane before.”

After just recently surviving an incredibly traumatizing event, surrounded by devastation everywhere, lacking data and not having prior experience dealing with a disaster on the scale of Hurricane Michael, the district had limited insight into what to ask for.

“So many times [we] were asked, ‘Just tell us what you need.’ Well, we don’t know. And I finally gave this illustration. I said, ‘You tell me how to teach a first

grader to read and I'll tell you what I need from a disaster!' I mean, you're not an educator and I'm not a disaster person. I just know we need help. So that became very frustrating. Nobody had a plan or roadmap."

"It was a feeling of helplessness. Different people kept asking the same questions over and over. And we didn't have the answers. We just didn't know what we needed at the time. It was all too much; too overwhelming. Each conversation brought more and more stress. I know they were trying to be helpful, but this wasn't the way to do it at the time."

It would have been more helpful had representatives from the various disaster agencies and organizations "held the district's hand" and offered some ideas or given examples from previous disasters. Providing BDS with a "menu of options" would have made these conversations much more productive.

"They should have been like, 'We have this resource available. We have this funding available. And this can pay for da-da-da. And we can get da-da-da into your school district. Will that help?' I think we could have had problem solving sessions about those things and come up with a list of our needs. Nobody ever offered us anything to choose from. Something like a menu. Does that make sense? They just kept asking 'So, what do you need?' And I would say, 'Well, I don't know. What do you have?' It's kind of like our MIS Department saying, 'What tool do you need to be able to do this activity?' And we are like, 'Well, I don't know. What can you create?'"

"It would have been very helpful if there were some sort of group from the state or feds that came and provided guidance on how you acquire funding for schools that have been through a natural disaster...this is what you do and this is who you need to contact and this is what to ask for. That's really what we needed."

As time went on, BDS had an opportunity to properly assess the storm's impacts and gain a clear understanding of what resources it needed.

"There's a point in the beginning when you don't know what you need. So, it would be good to have a menu of options to choose from. But later on, when you have a better understanding of what you do need, you can drive which resources to bring in and where those resources should go."

Unfortunately, by the time the district had a handle on what its needs were, some of the agencies and organizations stopped asking the district what they needed and just made assumptions instead.

“After a few months, we had a good grasp on where we were. And I remember that we had some folks that came in to visit us. But the people with the purse strings didn't say, ‘We're here to ask you what you need.’ They basically just told us what we needed. That would have been fine in the beginning, but not now. Now we knew what we needed. And we wanted to drive where those resources should go because we knew best.”

“I was involved when HHS came to see Mr. Husfelt. And we sat in this office. And they truly didn't know what we needed. But they didn't ask neither, right? “One person even said to me, ‘Well, I didn't even think about calling the district to see what they needed.’ They said that they were operating on past practices. [That] this is what they do.”

“I remember we heard there was some funding coming [available]. And so, when we asked the Federal folks how we can get the funding, I remember being told, ‘Well, it doesn't flow down that way.’ And then my question was, ‘How can we get that changed? How can we get it to where the funding flows to us?’ Because DCF was getting funding, but DCF didn't ask us what we needed. We knew we needed boots on the ground. We knew we needed people to come in from the outside to help. But DCF didn't know that. None of the decision makers with that money knew that.”

This led to a new series of stressors for district administrators.

“At one point after the hurricane, I would say that yes, we were grasping at straws to help get what our folks needed. But there was almost this level of a honeymoon phase, where there was so much resiliency and we had such a tight-knit community feel to everybody because we had this huge overwhelming level of empathy. So, everything was very well received. But then we were forced to take things that weren't what we truly needed. Things that became more burdensome. And people started to resent it. It almost totally undid our progress with having a positive message about mental health and taking away that stigma. It did real damage to our progress towards having trauma-sensitive, trauma-informed care in the schools. That [also] definitely damaged morale because we were forcing so much on our staff and our schools, but it really wasn't what they needed at the time.”

.and sometimes resulted in a waste of precious resources.

“Later on in the recovery, the Governor's wife provided us with a generous gift – a set of tele-mental health kiosks for each school. The problem was that we had

already been working with PanCare to get telehealth into our schools. So, half of our schools already had telehealth accessibility. And, the first lady's kiosks were only for mental health, where the PanCare side was mental health and physical health. It was a challenge for us to marry the PanCare and the first lady's telehealth equipment...How can we use the first lady's telehealth but not negatively impact the PanCare contract that we had? So that was a huge challenge. The other thing was somebody had to manage the first lady's telehealth equipment. So, the State did not give us funding for personnel. We got a device and it came with the license – but a second grader can't get on the device and login and connect to a medical platform. Someone has to escort that child to the room. We don't let children walk around campus by themselves, especially the elementary school. And so somebody had to escort the children and coordinate the schedule and log in and make sure that the parents sign the waiver forms. The whole process of managing it did not come with the machines – we also needed personnel. If they had only asked, 'What can we do to help you?' Then, we could have given them an idea of where we were and what we needed [because] we would have requested different resources than what we received. It was a nice gesture, but we desperately needed other resources and could have made much better use of that funding had they asked.”

Without the proper resources to address the considerable mental health needs of students and staff, a major mental health crisis emerged within one year of the storm.

“We weren't getting funding in the timely manner that we needed to address the mental health needs. So, the stress levels increased. You saw it among the staff. You saw it among the students. Eventually, we saw a huge spike in behaviors as well as the amount of Baker Acts¹ we were seeing...We had never been in the business of responding to the types of needs that [started] to come out about six to nine months after the storm on our school campuses. And it was extremely overwhelming. The levels of aggression among the students, the fighting, the pure breakdowns that our students were experiencing, it all took a toll on the staff who had to respond to that. We couldn't get them the resources they needed in a timely manner and that was so heartbreaking.”

It quickly became clear to BDS administrators that until the mental health crisis was addressed, educators and students were not going to be able to focus on learning. Additional resources were desperately needed.

¹ Baker Act is a Florida law allowing for the involuntary examination and institutionalization of a person who potentially has a mental illness and/or who may be a threat of harm to themselves or others.

Navigating the Resource Landscape

Identifying and bringing in resources became a significant focus of BDS's post-storm efforts. It also became one of the most challenging endeavors of the entire recovery process.

"The [Student Support Services Director] and I were a team. And thank goodness she was my teammate on this. All we did for probably a year after the storm was try to locate resources. That's all she and I did. If someone said we needed to talk to this person, we talked to that person. If someone said 'Oh, here's another person you should talk with,' we talked with that person. We just kept reaching out. And everywhere was a dead end."

"It was a year of seeking out funding, seeking out people, finding the right resources, and then trying to help get it to our people."

Prior to the hurricane, BDS staff had limited experience working with many of the governmental agencies, NGOs, and funders that operate in the disaster arena.

"Other than some of the big agencies and disaster relief organizations you typically hear about when a disaster occurs, we didn't really know who else was out there and what assistance they could provide. And not having a storm in our area for some time, we had few contacts with many of them. So, there was a huge learning curve."

"You don't know what you don't know. We had no idea who was out there, and what support they could offer. There wasn't a master list we could use. We needed help. We called anyone and everyone we could. Most led to dead ends. But that didn't matter. We knew someone was gonna help us out eventually."

This lack of experience not only slowed BDS leaders down in their search for resources, but also made it more challenging to navigate through the various unsolicited offers of help that came into the district after the storm. Some offers were useful, and the district was able to accept and utilize the resources. Other offers were not so helpful – or even legitimate.

"Weeding through the offers coming in for help was a process as well. Unfortunately, disasters often bring about people who try to take advantage of the situation for their own benefit. And some try to push something or some agenda that isn't right. We had to be careful about what offers we accepted. We became the gatekeepers."

"We did receive a number of offers for help that were clearly scams. But some people are clever and it's not so straightforward. Even the names of their

organizations sounded legit. But when you did the background work and looked deeper into them and what they were offering, you could tell something wasn't right. I'm telling you, everyone and anyone was coming out of the woodworks. We had to be careful."

"The best advice I can give is do some background checks. If you never heard of the organization or person or program before, ask for references and make sure you call all of them. And make sure the references themselves are legit. You'd be amazed at how far people will go to rip you off."

BDS found it worthwhile to create and maintain a list of potential resource partners. As a starting point, the district focused on local community partners it knew of or already had relationships with. For example, for mental health support, BDS looked initially at the St. Joe Community Foundation and the United Way of Northwest Florida for support. BDS also reached out to mental health service providers it had existing relationships with, such as Big Bend Community Based Care, Life Management, PanCare Health, the Gulf Coast Children's Advocacy Center, and the Emerald Coast Hospital, to name a few.

"I think it would be helpful if districts kept a list of community partners that they could contact for help when a hurricane or other disaster happens. And they should have conversations with these groups ahead of time. Like, 'How might you be able to help us if a big hurricane comes?' This way, you're both on the same page on what help each partner can offer."

BDS also found it useful to keep track of their outreach efforts.

"I would recommend that school districts keep a Google doc or some sort of shared file that tracks the organizations they reach out to for help and what their responses were. Make sure several people have access to that document...It's super helpful to have in case the person handling it gets sick or moves out of the district. Anyone can pick up right where they left off."

The district learned that some entities were not ready or willing to offer funding or other supports initially but later on were in a much better position to help.

"About six months after the storm, we reached out to the St. Joe Foundation for funding to help us address some of the mental health-related concerns that we started seeing rise up in the kids. Unfortunately, we did not receive any funding at the time. But we kept in touch with the Foundation. And sure enough, about six or seven months later, we received a grant that allowed us to hire a couple

mental health professionals so we could help the students. That was our first grant for mental health after the hurricane.”

It is important for districts and support entities to maintain communication and periodically revisit discussions about challenges and needs. After all, needs change over time. Having some resources set aside for needs that arise in the medium to long-term is vital to keeping the recovery efforts moving in the right direction.

“As time moves forward, the school districts will still need support, additional resources. Things pop up that you don’t know about or just can’t predict ahead of time. We found that out. We also found that [we] needed to have that flexibility to move resources around to where they were needed because things changed.”

“I think some people need to be on the ground in a school district several months after the disaster happens and interview key personnel or executive staff...I think that it is key. Have a response team come in and ask, ‘What are your needs now?’ That’ll help funnel the money better. And as needs change over time, that team should come back and ask those same questions again every six months or so.”

In Panama City, located just west of where the monster storm made landfall, drone video taken by storm chaser Brett Adair shows how the winds and rain ravaged a middle school.

Jinks Middle School took such a hit from the hurricane that Adair was able to fly the drone right through the school’s gym, where Michael’s fierce gusts peeled back the roof and collapsed walls. Not that everything was ripped apart: Even with debris lining the basketball court, a volleyball net remained taut and in place, awaiting the next match.



The volleyball net remains standing at Jinks Middle School in Panama City after Hurricane Michael tore through. (Brett Adair)

Hurricane Michael devastates a school gym in Panama City (Fedschun, 2018). Image source: Brett Adair, “Hurricane Michael devastation in Panama City, Florida seen in drone video, photos,” 2018. Accessed via <https://www.foxnews.com/us/hurricane-michael-devastation-in-panama-city-florida-seen-in-drone-video-photos>.

Securing Resources

Identifying potential partners and resources is only part of the puzzle. Being able to secure the resources can be another challenge. It took BDS over a year before they received their first funding for mental health.

“A huge frustration was the lack of immediate financial relief. It felt like we spent pretty much an entire school year trying to advocate for the needs of our district and trying to get some financial support. And a lot of people were just not having answers or were telling us ‘no.’ And many we would not hear back from at all after we would submit grant applications. It was frustrating.”

This put a lot of stress on district administrators, who felt the burden of knowing help was urgently needed and yet were unable to secure the necessary assistance.

“Part of the stress was hearing from the campuses what their stressors were and not having the resources to deploy to them. That was very stressful because they look to us to help them solve their problems. And we had nothing to offer them except [we] could come out if [they] needed us to cover classes. We were all covering classes. We were all pushing out to help where their vacancies were. But that’s really all we could do. I mean, we were doing our best to coordinate the services that we had into the schools, but there was nothing else to give them. There were no [mental health] people to give them for the adults and students to talk to. That was very, very, very hard because we’re supposed to be able to help them.”

“The schools didn’t know how hard we were working to try to find the resources. But to them, it wasn’t important, because they still didn’t have the resources. And we’re supposed to remove the roadblocks. That was very hard on us as district leaders to not be able to provide them with what they needed.”

With the mental health crisis deepening, district administrators continued to advocate very hard for resources any chance they got.

“It was all hands on. I mean everyone was doing everything they could to get the word out that we needed help. Heck, I called our local representatives almost on a daily basis. The secretaries knew my voice by heart!”

A lesson BDS learned is that no matter how much devastation occurs or how justified your needs are, not all requests for assistance will come through or all grant applications be awarded. In fact, most do not succeed. This is one reason why it is vital not to “put all your eggs in one basket” and depend on one funder or rely on one grant application to come through.

“One of the biggest disappointments for us was when Save The Children had offered to provide mental health support for our staff in the form of self-care trainings. This was a huge win for us because we desperately needed more support for our staff at the time. They were really struggling. So, we were counting on Save The Children to help us with that. And then, at the very last minute, they backed out. I mean, we had a contract with them and everything. We had the trainings completely set up. Staff were signed up and ready to go. I believe the first training was scheduled just a day or two later when they called and told us they weren’t going to do them. That was a huge blow. We didn’t have other resources lined up for our staff at that time.”

It is critical to keep reaching out for help, knocking on doors, diversifying your options, and applying for grants whenever possible.

“Don’t let rejection frustrate you. It can be disappointing and at times infuriating, but you have to remain optimistic and keep trying. Leave no stone unturned. Eventually, you will succeed.”

Although the funding came too late to prevent the mental health crisis from occurring, the district’s efforts to raise funds ultimately paid off. BDS received substantial supports from a number of different agencies and organizations, including FEMA, the U.S. Department of Education, UNICEF, SAMHSA, and the St. Joe Community Foundation, to name a few. These supports made all the difference in the district’s ability to address the mental health crisis and other critical needs. Please see Addendum A for more information on the grants BDS received.

“We finally did get the SERV and RESTART grants. That was the support we had been waiting for because that funding allowed us to finally bring in the mental health professionals we needed for the kids. It was a tremendous help, and I’m thankful we were able to get those grants. I only wish that funding had come much earlier. If it had, I am certain we would have avoided the mental health crisis we faced. It’s a shame things had to get that bad for the support to come through.”

“Once we received the funding to hire mental health professionals in our schools, things started to turn for the better. Our Triad teams made a huge difference in slowing and eventually starting to reverse the mental health crisis we had fallen into.”

“Because of increased funding due to the hurricane, we began receiving the consultation services of Ernest Cox. I believe that Ernest has been instrumental in many of the mindset and framework changes we have been [working] on in BDS. He was able to work with all school counselors who shared their voices to comprise our vision, mission, and plan of progress. I do not believe we would have been able to build the structure that we have without his assistance.”



These are before and after Hurricane Michael photographs of Mexico Beach. From Hurricane Michael 2018, by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d. (<https://www.weather.gov/tae/HurricaneMichael2018>). In public domain.



Longer-Term Challenges

As the recovery wore on, the district began to focus attention on its medium to longer-term needs. Some of the long-term challenges that began arising were not present in the early weeks and months after the storm first struck.

“When we came back after winter break and settled in, this was in early 2019, we were planning for what we were going to need the rest of the school year and beyond that. At that time, we still didn’t know all of the problems we were going to have to deal with later on. But we were starting to see some of the problems show up and we began to figure out a plan for those.”

Other long-term challenges stemmed from existing issues that had evolved over time. This included challenges with housing, staffing, and mental health.

Housing

Among the myriad of longer-term challenges brought about by Hurricane Michael, the ensuing housing crises had a major impact on the district and surrounding communities.

“The housing crisis has been one of the worst things to come out of this storm. It just has impacted us in so many ways. So many negative ways. Just terrible.”

The hurricane caused extensive damage to many residential areas.

“Some of the neighborhoods that were hardest hit were lower-income areas. These neighborhoods had a lot of subsidized housing and homes that had been in families for generations.”

“All of the housing on Tyndall Air Force Base was completely destroyed. And because many military families lived close to the base, they all lost their homes. That’s where some of the worst damage was. Pretty much all of our Tyndall families left the area.”

“Tens of thousands of homes and apartments were destroyed. Many, many more were heavily damaged. Basically anything east of the [Hathaway] bridge saw major damage or complete destruction.”

“100% of the public housing in Panama City was destroyed. 100%! Any public housing complex that was in the eyewall was gone. Not livable.”

With so many homes and apartment complexes damaged or destroyed throughout the region, there was not enough housing left for those who needed it.

“Thousands and thousands of families lost their homes. So much damage. But where could you go? There was nowhere left in Panama City for people to go. There wasn’t anything in the area that wasn’t damaged. You had to go west to the beach area. But those places filled up quickly. And many people couldn’t afford to live there.”

These conditions contributed to a dramatic increase in housing-related costs. Rent and sale prices increased exponentially because of the high demand and tight supply. Costs for building materials also skyrocketed.

“It was insane. Some rents in Panama City went up 400% more than what they were prior to the storm.”

“So three years later, we're still at rent gouging. Now I can charge you \$2,500 a month for a one-bedroom apartment because I can get \$2,500 a month...When what used to be \$700 a month is now \$2,500 a month, that's ridiculous! Can you get it? Sure, you can get it because people need somewhere to stay. Your teachers have to have housing. Your support people like your firemen and your police all have to have housing. But why are you doing that?”

As a result, many who lost their residences during the storm had difficulty finding new places to stay.

“We tried to find a temporary place to live, but it was impossible. We ended up going into Alabama because we couldn't get anything closer. Every place was taken or they wanted some ridiculous amount of money that we couldn't afford.”

Many families could no longer afford to live in the area and were forced to move away.

“One of the things that happened is that - it's again like the perfect storm - the cost of building is just astronomical; the cost of living and housing here is ridiculous. So a lot of people have left. [You] can't afford to live here anymore if you don't already have a home.”

“Right afterwards we had an issue because of a lot of teachers had to move because of not having any homes...They had no place to stay.”

“Our student population dropped by about 20% right after the storm! That was a huge number. To lose that many students so quickly was something we never would have imagined before Michael. But when you looked at the amount of devastation, and so few places left in the area for families to go, it's no wonder they left. You can't blame them.”

Some families lived in tents or RVs on their property until their homes were repaired.

“We lived in a FEMA trailer in our front yard for a very long time. Almost two years. It was cramped. There was very little privacy. It was tough, but we didn't really have any other options. My husband and I both had jobs here that we needed, and we couldn't afford another place to live. So we did the best we could.”

“Let me tell you, that trailer was no Four Seasons hotel. Trust me, I didn’t want to be in there any longer than I had to. The day I got back into my house, I literally kissed the floor and cried.”

“Many of our students and families [were] living in new and unfamiliar environments such as shared homes, tents, or RV’s, many with little or none of their personal belongings.”

A substantial number of families became homeless. The school district’s homeless student population grew by an incredible 700% after the hurricane, equal to almost 20% of the district’s entire student population.

“Prior to the storm, 748 students were identified as homeless. Following the storm, this number increased to around 5,500.”

Short-term funding allowed many residents to stay in temporary housing such as hotels or condos for a short period of time after the storm. However, when that funding dried up, the rate of homelessness increased dramatically as residents were forced to leave their temporary shelters.

“The number of families that became homeless overnight was astronomical. We had never dealt with such an issue before. The government was able to help a lot of the families find temporary shelter, but after a while those subsidies dried up and the families ended up with nowhere to go. At times they were literally thrown out on the street. Those that had temporary housing on the beach side got kicked out once the tourist season began. We pretty much had a second wave of homelessness as a result of that.”

A number of families ended up living in the wreckage of their damaged homes.

“Some of our students were living in buildings that had been condemned after the storm. The roofs were partially collapsed or mostly gone. The walls were crumbling -- unsafe electricity -- unsanitary conditions. The families didn’t have the money to go anywhere else. It was their property, but they couldn’t afford to rebuild it. They didn’t have insurance. There was one half-destroyed house that had four families living in it! Just terrible conditions.”

“I know of a number of families who were living in tents or campers in their front yards. I’ve visited others [who were] living in their heavily damaged homes, without roofs or intact walls.”

Years later, a significant number of BDS students and their families continue to live in substandard housing or combined living spaces with other families.

“We still have kids living in temporary shelters like tents, campers, living with relatives or other people...I mean, yeah, Callaway is getting a lot more homes built and everything like that. But there's still not a whole lot of affordable housing available. When I look at the amount of rent and house payments, a lot of our parents and families can't afford that. I mean, you're talking \$1,700 or \$1,800 dollars a month for just rent. There's no way! How are they going to do that? So, I know they've got to be living, probably at least two families in a house or some that are still living in a camper, that kind of stuff.”

“I don't know how many kids I met this year falling asleep in class. It's like, they're living on somebody's couch or they're sleeping four to a bed or whatever. So, I feel like that stuff is still ongoing.”

“Even to this day we have families living in condemned houses from the storm. They are still in there, and it's been over three years.”

The housing-related challenges had significant effects on many students and staff.

“It was hard. Not having a place to live is very unnerving. It affected me in so many ways. I know it affected my work performance. It was hard to work all day and come home to a tiny RV and be supportive of my family. There was no privacy. No time for myself. I just wanted to be back in my home in the worst way, sleeping in my own bed again.”

“We were just drowning. Another place to live and another bad situation or another week of just not knowing where we were going to live next. I like to know what's next and to plan for what's next. And I had absolutely no control, and that was unnerving a lot of times. If I could just sit back and know that this was going to be okay; that we're going to be okay on the other side of it, I think that would have done a lot. Like I said, it was easy to get a short fuse.”

“Housing has gone up...Rental prices went up...Trying to get things fixed, still struggling with insurance companies, still living with multiple families in one home, things like that. And of course, we've had some behavioral issues. I don't know if you can completely attribute those behavioral issues to the housing problems caused by Michael, but that can also be added into some of the things we've gone through since.”

“Many students changed schools due to school closures or the need to move to temporary housing – either doubling up with others or moving to a motel/hotel/condo temporarily. This required school counselors to assist with enrollment, class assignments, providing needed items [like] clothing, supplies, etc., as well as acclimating these new students into the school.”

The housing crisis also affected the district’s ability to bring in assistance or hire new staff after the storm, as people from outside the community were unable to find a place to live.

“At one point, we even talked about having folks that would come into the area and help us on the ground from other districts around the state and even from other states like North Carolina. But, we had nowhere for them to stay. So, we were [seeing] if we could we get some motor homes or RV's in here to get these people to stay...So we could find people that would volunteer to come, but then where they going to stay? It seemed like there was always a barrier to getting the things that we needed.”

The housing crisis was just one of many long-term challenges the school district had to contend with after the hurricane. Staffing was another long-term concern that arose after the storm.



Storm debris lines the street along Balboa Avenue in Panama City. (Starling, 2018b).

Staffing

BDS experienced significant employee turnover in the months and years following Hurricane Michael. This is similar to what other school districts have reported after other major disasters.

"We have seen a big turnover in staff since the hurricane. Big time. And at all levels. Even here in the Nelson building, there's been a big turnover up here."

Factors such as increased challenges at work and at home, added stressors, financial strains, and poor coping contributed to a significant number of employees leaving or retiring after the storm.

"People have left for a number of reasons. But I think the common thread is the storm. Whatever impacts the storm had on their lives, those were significant enough for them to leave their jobs with the district."

"I know for [my friend], she said it was just too much pressure on her. She had to choose between her job and her family and she chose her family. She needed time to be with her kids and to help them through their own challenges after Michael."

"[My colleague] told me he was just too stressed and couldn't handle it anymore. He was coming to work unhappy every day. Going home unhappy every day. He lost weight. He looked pale. You could see he was struggling."

The housing crisis also impacted the district's ability to retain much-needed staff after the hurricane.

"A co-worker was living in a temporary apartment after the storm and got kicked out...And she decided to move back up north to where she was from. So, we went from having three classes to two classes and we had to move our kids around because of that."

"We've literally had teachers and employees resign saying they had to move because they couldn't afford to live here. I mean, that's been happening kind of regularly."

Some BDS employees highlighted that they felt a need to be strong for their students and

colleagues while also supporting their own families and putting their own homes and lives back together. It was a lot to juggle.

“People were forever dealing with insurance and contractors and trying to figure all that out. It was very hard for people to get time to have those appointments met...And so, our staff were dedicated to our kids, right? They were there all day, every day, being there for the kids. They were putting their own needs aside.”

To get through it all, some staff set aside their emotions while putting the needs of others first.

“You almost had to set aside how you were feeling in order to do the work that had to be done. And it’s like, ‘I don’t have time to deal with my emotions because my house is a wreck, my community is a wreck, my life feels like it’s a wreck. I can’t deal with how I’m feeling because I have to get to the doing.’ People had to get back to work. We had to get back to school.”

This sometimes occurred at the expense of their own mental health.

“Substance abuse was something that we dealt with even with our employees. Many were just overwhelmed. So many people did not have insurance. So many people got evicted. So many people had no resources.”

“I had nothing left in the tank. I gave it all to my students. I did everything I possibly could to help them. But it completely drained me.”

The stressors of the job didn’t help. One significant stressor for many BDS employees was that they were being held to the same level of accountability as before, during a period when they faced so many abnormal circumstances.

“The big challenge was that it didn’t seem that we were being heard by DOE about the removal of the high level of accountability. They still expected evaluations to be done the way we had planned them to be. They still expected student performance to be included and to be held accountable post-storm. That put an incredible amount of stress on people.”

“If I’m working as hard as I can, and I’m rebuilding my home and my life, and you hand me a piece of paper and it says anywhere on there anything less than highly effective, its anger inducing. It’s frustrating. It’s depressing. Every single emotion for a teacher is tied up in what that says...And, of course, the student performance is directly tied to teacher’s pay.”

“We still have folks that still don't have their homes repaired. Buildings and businesses that haven't been repaired. And so all of that is layered on top of each other, plus the stress of accountability with the state.”

BDS requested “grace’ from FLDOE wherever possible in order to relieve some of the work-related stress their employees were experiencing.

“We asked [FLDOE] for a little grace. Whatever they could give us. We understood that some things were required by law and out of their hands. They would have needed legislative approval. But there were other things they could have done to make things easier on our employees. And anything would have helped at that point.”

“It was very frustrating that we couldn't seem to get DOE to come up with an answer quickly enough, and they never really did. They still held us accountable to school grades. I think that was just really frustrating. We tried to get them to hear us. And we kept saying, ‘Come spend some time here. I mean, just come and see what people are dealing with. We're just asking for some compassion and some sort of lessening of some of these accountability pieces.”

Sadly, many employees burned out.

“I know a number of teachers who just burned out. They couldn't take it anymore. If they were at retirement age, they took that opportunity. Others just quit. We had a couple who went on winter break and just never came back.”

“It was all so overwhelming. The stress was just too much. I would wake up in the morning and had absolutely no desire to go to work anymore. Seeing the kids no longer brought me any joy. I was done. I was over all of it.”

The district also found that some employees were unable to continue in positions they held prior to the storm. This too led to staffing changes.

“We were in a challenge at the time because people that had backgrounds and work experience that were very successful in the past – many were having challenges because of the disaster. So, based on prior work experience and prior observations of job duties, you were thinking you had the right person sitting in the seat. And then, things happen within that person's life that really affect the way that person handles their job and handles their position. That was a learning experience for us.”

“You have to make hard decisions. Is this the right person? And if not, you have to be able to make those changes for your district...Because the person that you had in the seat before the disaster might not be the same person that you need in the same seat after the disaster. It just depends on what's going on.”

“I've had to have a number of hard conversations over the past couple of years. And my folks up here know that if I come to them and I have to have a hard conversation with them, it's not out of anger. There is no malice. It's just, this isn't working, and this is why and how can we fix this. And we come to an agreement on it most of the time about what we need to do...But there are times when you give someone a second or a third or even a fourth chance, and there is no improvement...The folks in the field don't care who is sitting in the seat, they want to see action. They want to see progress towards improving their situations in the schools. And so sometimes that means it is best for everyone to make a change. If someone is struggling, it's not good for the organization, and it's not good for that person.”

BDS made a major push to hire new staff. However, the housing crisis had a pronounced impact on the district's ability to bring in new educators from outside the community. This significantly reduced the potential hiring pool.

“I've had industries all over the county tell me this. People will come and look and want to move here, but then they find out how much housing is for the salaries – what we're paying, what businesses are paying, and they are just unable to do that. The cost of housing is just a major problem...And so we realized that that's caused some problems with hiring.”

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic brought another wave of staff turnover and hiring difficulties almost two years after the hurricane. The pandemic, combined with already existing employment challenges due to Michael, had a major impact on the district.

“We were already short-staffed, and then the pandemic hit. I guess there's no good time for a pandemic, but it literally could not have come at a worse time for us. We lost even more people who just quit or retired. And then there were no subs available at all.”

“It was hard because we lost a lot of progress and momentum with things, with structures that we had in place districtwide...Before the hurricane, we had a lot of progress with best practices being implemented. We spent so much time on training and professional development in growing capacity and putting

consistent systems in place. So then, after the hurricane, when there was so much transition and turnover, a lot of that was undone. It was very disappointing to watch that take place.”

“We still had positions open after the hurricane that hadn’t been filled when the pandemic started in 2020. And of course, the pandemic made things worse. Even more people left. And on top of that, many people who might have considered a job in education no longer wanted to work in a school. So, now we had even less staff with fewer hiring prospects.”

Because of the difficulty in hiring new teachers after the storm, many vacant positions went unfilled for extended periods of time. This led to staffing shortages at a number of schools, the burden upon which fell on existing employees to deal with.

“Well, there’s been more work for everyone. We have the same number of kids but now less staff. We still have to serve the kids. Who else is going to do the work?”

“No subs, no paras. That’s made an already difficult situation worse for many educators. It’s not like they can take much time off because who is going to cover their classes? I know it’s really hard for me just to get a doctor appointment because I can’t make one during school hours because I can’t leave my class. There’s no one to cover my class.”

To assist, BDS leaders had to be creative in finding ways to help. For example, school administrators themselves began covering classrooms and other duties.

“As a principal, I am a jack-of-all-trades. My AP and I have been doing the janitorial duties because we haven’t had a janitor for a while.”

“You think you have a schedule and then at any given time your folks need to be all-hands-on-deck. You need to be able to drop what you’re doing and show up at a school. Be able to help that school, whether it’s helping to respond to parents’ phone calls or jumping in and subbing in a classroom. We’ve spent more time since the hurricane and in the global pandemic in subbing because we needed to give our teachers and principals some relief.”

District administrators also pitched in to support the schools in any way they could.

“It’s truly Student Support Services – we’re there to support. And whether that be answering phones, covering the cafeteria, covering classrooms, that’s what we

have to be willing to do and drop our other work and priorities and go and do that...Going and helping out so that the principals and the teachers don't feel alone, that they feel supported."

"As the director, you have to be this kind of servant leader where nothing is above you. You know, if we're needed to mop floors in the cafeteria because the school is short a custodian, we're going to go do that. I'm going to go and do that. I'm going to show my team that we're going and supporting the schools no matter what the task may be. Nothing is above us and we're not better than them."

Some school administrators hired new staff with little previous classroom experience to fill open teaching positions.

"We've had to hire a number of folks that are new to teaching. I'm talking brand new. Some have never even set foot in a classroom before. We are doing our best to support them. It doesn't mean they are going to be bad teachers. It just means they need more support until they get their footing."

"We've lost so many great colleagues after the hurricane who either moved away or retired. That left huge voids in experience. So when the district started hiring all these new educators, some of who had no prior classroom experience, there was a big learning curve there. Lots and lots of training. And coming in after a major disaster with all the disruptions. And then with COVID. Whew! Not easy."

Bringing in fresh educators instead of seasoned veterans posed numerous challenges.

"I don't mean this in a bad way, but they're not trained. They're not experienced. They're coming from outside of their initial field. And so it takes much more time and energy to get them up to speed than it normally would with someone who is experienced."

"Some of the newer folks aren't attune to the school culture. They aren't used to working with kids in a challenging environment. They need to learn these things. Some have made some mistakes but that's to be expected. Most will grow into it."

However, some BDS administrators saw this as an opportunity to grow and instill new ideas into the system.

"For me, I see this as a way to building our workforce for the future. The next generation of educators so to speak. Some bring experiences and knowledge

from other jobs that can be very beneficial – not only for our students but our entire school community. Sure, it is not the same as someone who has years of experience in a classroom. But there’s also a lot of positives I’ve seen as well. Some of the new folks are great. The glass is more than half full.”

The district learned that, regardless of experience, having problem-solving skills, being open to new ideas, and being able to effectively communicate and work as a team with colleagues are critical traits that can help any employee succeed during times of adversity.

“I’ve learned that some people are just not problem solvers...I would get so frustrated because things were not happening, and then it just came to me. I’m like, ‘Well, some people just aren’t problem solvers. They’re black or white – with no gray.’ If something hasn’t happened before, then [they] don’t know what to do. They can’t think outside the box. And so, surrounding yourself with people that are problem solvers is key to making good things happen and to getting things done.”

“You can’t do it alone. I will tell you this. I’m only as good a leader as those people I’ve got surrounding me...I mean, I’ve got an amazing team! If I didn’t have all the people that I did, we wouldn’t be where we are today. But we have the right people in the right spots and we’ve overcome quite a bit...Understanding those talents is important, and leadership putting those people in the right niches is just as important.”

It is also vital to have the right people in the right positions.

“You’ve got to have the right people in the seats on the bus...If we [didn’t have] the right facilities person, we would not have opened school as soon as we did. If finance is not willing to listen to the ideas and be able to get outside of that normal spending pattern, things aren’t going to happen. And if folks are not open to dialogue and discussion, then things are going to be stagnant, and people are going to become more frustrated.”

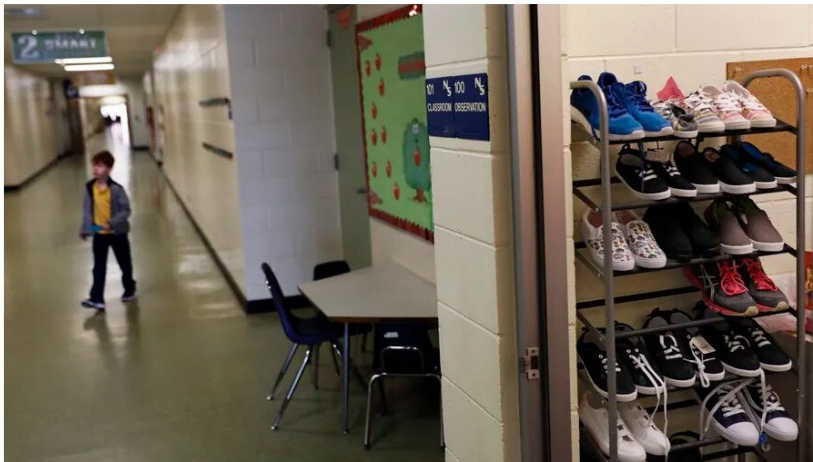
One of the enduring lessons learned from the aftermath of Hurricane Michael is that every single employee, whether they are currently still with the district or not, played an important role in helping BDS recover from the storm. Individually, each employee helped the district take an incremental step forward. Together, as a family, they helped the district make monumental strides since the storm. It is because of that team effort that the district has managed to come as far along as it has since that devastating day in October 2018.



Mental Health

Eight months after Hurricane Michael, many fear a mental health crisis

Panhandle officials are closely tracking students' mental health needs.



A broom closet in Northside Elementary School is filled with donated shoes for students whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Michael in Panama City. With 4,700 students among the homeless since the hurricane, principals and teachers at Bay County schools are on the lookout for students who are wearing dirty clothes or missing shoes. Northside Elementary School was given industrial washers and dryers so students can get their clothes cleaned. (AP Photo/David Goldman) [DAVID GOLDMAN | AP]

By **Elizabeth Koh** Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

The aftereffects of Hurricane Michael's devastation raise fears of a mental health crisis for students (Koh, 2019). Image source: David Goldman, "Eight months after Hurricane Michael, many fear a mental health crisis," 2019. <https://www.tampabay.com/florida-politics/buzz/2019/06/13/eight-months-after-hurricane-michael-many-fear-a-mental-health-crisis/>.

Mental Health

Psychological impacts often get overlooked in the aftermath of a disaster, especially in the medium to longer term.

“I guess, for me, if it wasn’t something I could physically see or touch, I wasn’t worried about it. I think a lot of people felt that way. Out of sight -- out of mind. Boy did that come back to bite later on.”

“People get so caught up in fixing their homes that they forget to fix themselves. You know what I’m saying? Like, if you are not in a good place mentally, emotionally, what good is everything else? You need to put the same effort into building yourself back as you do building your home back.”

“You don’t worry about mental health right away because you are worrying about your family, worrying about getting to a safe place, worrying about where your next meal is coming from, worrying about getting electricity back, worrying about how you are going to deal with your insurance company – all of those kinds of things. You aren’t focused on how you are feeling or how all of it is affecting you psychologically.”

There is always a significant need for mental health services after a disaster. Yet many people do not view mental health as a critical part of the recovery process.

“I don’t know why there isn’t more attention paid to mental health because, as we’ve learned, it’s super important. Maybe it’s because it’s something that shows up later on. Whatever it is, people don’t pay enough attention to it.”

“It seems we go through this every time there is a big disaster in the U.S. Five, six months after; you start to see the problems show up. And you see a story or two on the news about mental health and the need to take care of yourself, but a lot of people don’t take it seriously. And then there are never enough resources left to help all the people who need them. It’s like we didn’t learn our lessons from the last fifty disasters.”

Psychological reactions are usually delayed and typically begin to surface months, a year or even longer after the event occurred. This usually happens well after the national media have left the area and most disaster relief agencies and organizations have committed their funding to other parts of the recovery effort.

“The mental health reactions didn’t come out right away. It’s like they manifested in quiet, behind a closed door. It wasn’t until about February when I

noticed changes in a number of my students. Their behaviors, their tempers, their academics started to change. It was then that I realized that we were dealing with something more than we had anticipated.”

“You didn’t know the whole mental health thing was going to become such a problem. I guess because it’s something under the surface. You didn’t know it was bubbling inside these kids until it got to a point where they just exploded.

“I think one of the most difficult things for us to imagine or predict or wrap our brain around was the fact that this hurricane event was not going to be over in six months or a year. When [consultants] said, ‘Three years from now you’re going to be in a worse situation than you are right now for mental health,’ which obviously affects physical health as well, that was just hard to imagine. And I think when you’ve never been through that experience before, you can’t even think that far out.”

As a result, mental health is often underpublicized and under-resourced.

“It’s interesting how the whole disaster system works. A lot of money goes into rebuilding physical structures like homes and office buildings and schools and roads. A lot goes into reopening businesses so economies can restart. And I get that. All very important. But then when you look at the investments made to mental health, which is so critically important to the long-term recovery of a community, it is comparatively very little. A drop in the bucket. I don’t know why we don’t invest more in mental health. When you look at the costs of a disaster in the long run, a lot of money can be saved; lives can be saved, by investing more in mental health. After my experience with Michael, I can say it is as critical as any other part of the recovery effort.”

The consequences of not properly attending to mental health needs can be serious and even deadly.

“When you look at previous disasters, you see suicide rates increase, you see greater numbers of people diagnosed with depression, Post Traumatic Stress and other psychological disorders. People start to struggle. They lose jobs; they lose friends; they fight with their families. Their personality changes; they turn to substances. You see a lot more violence and physical abuse. Things can easily spiral out of control. In a way, a mental health disorder is a lot like cancer. If you don’t treat it, it will grow and take you down.”

Of all the long-term challenges BDS faced in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, the mental health crisis had the largest impact on the school district. It was also the most difficult challenge to address.

“I would say the number one thing school districts need to pay attention to after a big hurricane is mental health, because that’s the thing that sneaks up on you and can really disrupt everything. We learned that lesson. Don’t underestimate mental health. I think a lot of districts are more aware of it nowadays, a lot more than in the past. But, I will tell you this, they probably are gonna underestimate what they are going to need to do to address it. When you get something like a Hurricane Michael, it’s a whole different ballgame.”

Employee Mental Health

Almost all BDS employees felt the psychological effects of Hurricane Michael, regardless of whether they experienced the storm's landfall directly, evacuated out of the area, or came to the community after the storm.

"It doesn't matter if you were smack in the middle of the eye, or if you were on the very outskirts of it, that hurricane affected you mentally. Even people who evacuated or moved into the area afterwards were deeply affected. I mean, how could you not be? Have you ever seen such damage before? A Category 5 affects everyone. We all felt that stress in some way; if not directly we felt it through the kids and their families. Clearly some had it worse than others, but everyone felt something."

"I would say it took a toll on everybody that was living in it all the time, where you never were able to escape it. I definitely know that it took a toll on people. And they would leave the community to go and get away for a little break but then come back and all the same emotions and all the same things would hit them again."

The mental health effects differed from person to person, with some feeling more impacts than others. This depended partly on a person's experiences with the storm and its aftermath.

"The storm had a huge impact on me and my family. Seeing what we saw and experiencing what we did, I wouldn't wish that on anyone...One of my really good friends lives west of here and didn't have it that bad. So she's been doing pretty good. But there are definitely days it hits me hard. It still does."

"I have colleagues that were, you know, a bit stressed after the storm; but I wouldn't say it's been too bad for them. And then I have other colleagues who have just really struggled with their mental health since the storm. Everyone is different. And it's hard to know how someone is doing because some hide it really well."

For people who had experienced prior trauma in their life, the storm brought back memories of past times that were difficult.

"I had been through some previous trauma years ago. And I really hadn't thought about it for a very long time, until after the hurricane...I was in a really bad place and couldn't stop thinking about it. It's like all those old wounds that had been closed were reopened by the storm."

“My husband had been in the service in Iraq and some other places, active combat zones. And he had seen some pretty bad things. And after Michael hit, he really had a difficult time. He said all the debris and destroyed buildings reminded him of some of the things he saw when he was in the military. I guess he had some flashbacks as a result.”

There were many different stressors that people had to cope with that were directly or indirectly related to the storm. Part of understanding the toll on mental health for BDS employees means understanding the stressors that they experienced.

“It was like all my hard work had just been taken by one act of nature – things that I can never replace or find again, things that my grandmothers made me who are now deceased. They were all gone.”

“Everything was just harder. It was harder to drive around, harder to find gas, harder to go to the grocery store and get food, harder to get a doctor’s appointment. You couldn’t even find a repairman if something broke. Everything cost more. Everything was just more difficult.”

“Finding a place to live was next to impossible. We moved five times in less than a year. Five times! It was really hard to deal with.”

“There were lots of things that would go wrong and prevent and delay people from getting back into their homes in a timely manner. It was not quick. You know, there were only a few local contractors here in Bay County, so workers swarmed in from everywhere. It was hard to find a trusted, approved person that could really work on their home...Unfortunately, people would end up trusting a contractor only to find out they were getting scammed or taken advantage of, and they would have to get that work repaired and fixed...And so many horror stories about insurance companies dragging things out -- people trying to hire public adjusters because they weren’t getting enough from their insurance companies to repair damages or rebuild. It was a nightmare.”

“We were stressing big time. All of the major industries shut down after Michael. My husband lost his job and was having trouble finding a new one. Everything cost more. I wasn’t making enough to support the family on my teacher salary, so he had to work. We tried our best to stretch and make ends meet. In a way we were lucky because we had a roof over our heads. But we were constantly worried we would not be able to pay the rent each month. Do you know how stressful that is?”

“We lost our home in the hurricane. And we went to stay with relatives up in Alabama. We had nowhere else to go. And so, when they reopened the school, I drove every day about an hour and a half each way for almost six months. Some days it took even longer. But yeah, I drove about three hours a day. Because I needed my job, I needed the money. But I also wanted to be there for my kids and for my friends at work. It was important for me to be there for them.”

“My son has special needs. And his ABA therapist left town after the hurricane. And with the schools and providers closed after the storm, he had no services for a long time. I tried to get help through DCF, but they weren’t able to do anything. He really regressed. When the school reopened, he started to receive services again. But then COVID happened with all those disruptions. He has struggled so much since the storm. We all have. Sometimes I just cry because I know he had been doing so well before the storm and to see him lose a lot of that; it’s just so hard.”

“When the tropical storm came through this last time, I had a lot more anxiety. The rain itself doesn’t bother me, but the wind and the lightning, and when there’s noise associated with it, I mean, I have never been one to go hide in our closet before, but now I sometimes do...Like, I have to just go in there and close the door, just so it’s quiet, because it makes me so nervous. I definitely have more emotions and anxiety after it... I can definitely tell those things are different for me now than they used to be.”

“People are still carrying baggage many years later that is still related to the storm...For many of us, it’s not over. Not by a long shot.”

For some, storm-related stressors were layered on top of other challenges that had already existed in their lives prior to the hurricane.

“I think that people who were struggling before the storm are struggling even more now...You know, single parents or the paycheck-to-paycheck families that were making it work before and now it’s not working. And so I think a lot of children have lost their stability. A lot of people have lost their way.”

“One of our teachers had some challenges going on before the storm. And then the storm just made things a lot worse. I think it was all too much for her. She moved away, and we haven’t heard from her since.”

Many BDS employees experienced stressors in the workplace as well as in their personal lives.

“I felt like there was never enough time in the day. I felt like, you know, we had the challenge of all the normal things we do plus now responding to the hurricane...So we still had students with healthcare plans, and the custody issues were there, and head lice and students needing 504s, and interventions, and kids needed help with attendance and discipline. But then, a huge chunk of our work was dedicated to the hurricane relief and grant applications and seeking out funding, seeking out supports, and resources for our staff, resources for our students. So I did feel the stress of it all. It felt like the workload had doubled, if not tripled, a lot of days.”

“My days were very busy and very stressful before the hurricane. And the hurricane just made things worse. My students were having a lot of trouble after the storm. Some of them had gone through some pretty horrible experiences and were having a really hard time. It was very difficult to teach them, and I was super stressed about my evaluation. You know, teachers work really hard. And we don’t get paid near what we should. We go to work early in the morning and get out in the afternoon, and then I go home to my family and take care of them. And they were having their own problems from the storm. We were dealing with insurance and contractors and that whole nightmare. The roof would leak every time it rained.”

“I had all these new roles and responsibilities. I was just trying to learn and figure it all out, and I didn’t have anyone as an example to fall back on for support. Like, ‘What should I be doing now?’ That was difficult.”

“The teachers’ stress levels was [were] out the roof... They didn’t have enough in them to support the kids because their own stress was at a high...Of course, the kids were being more off the chain because their lives was disrupted, so there was an irritability there, [and] sometimes that exploded in the classroom.”

“I think that at a district level they’re exhausted. All your specialists are exhausted. Teacher level, I cannot imagine that kind of stress. The kids are behind academically, academically low. And then the behaviors...I will say it’s horrible. It is so bad...The people here are exhausted. Like, if that’s something that I can express to the masses of the world, it is true exhaustion.”

Some staff reported experiencing strong feelings of guilt after the storm.

“My brother was able to secure a place for us to stay for about a month in the Destin area [right after the storm]. And so, it was very hard to not be in Bay County while everyone else that you knew was in Bay County stuck with no power, no water, no cell service, no running toilets. You know, none of those things. And you felt very guilty. That was my experience, was feeling very guilty.”

“I did have some guilt around the fact that we weren’t having to deal with all of these extra life altering things. People lost their home. They lost people they love. We weren’t having to deal with any of that. I remember, whenever my boss would say, ‘Who’s been affected by the storm?’ or ‘Who’s home was destroyed?’ I would sit there with my hand down and all these hands went up. And I just felt so guilty about that -- so guilty.”

“I tried to stay really quiet because I felt a lot of guilt. Out at the beach, we had a pretty light impact comparatively...I just kind of kept it quiet that we weren’t having to rebuild. I had to deal with some trees. I had to deal with a fence, some minor, minor, damage to some outbuildings. So, I just tried to keep quiet about the fact that we only had to be out of power for about seventy two hours when I knew that friends of mine were out for weeks.”

“I guess I have what you would call survivors guilt after all of that, because my house really wasn’t damaged, and I was working with people who lost everything...It was really hard sometimes to deal with that feeling...I just had to keep telling myself that my house got spared for a reason – so I can help others. Because I’m not dealing with total devastation, I can support other people.”

While life became more difficult for a lot of BDS employees after Hurricane Michael, many showed amazing resilience in the face of so much stress. Finding positive ways to cope with such incredibly difficult circumstances helped many get through difficult times.

“I know what my limits are, and I know that I have to have sleep or nobody wants me doing anything, whether it’s counseling or test coordination or whatever. And so, I was more attentive to at least going to bed when I was supposed to go to bed and not necessarily staying up until I felt like I wanted to go to bed...And over time, you kind of get your body back in the habit of turning off the things that are keeping you up. I know that doesn’t work for everybody, but setting aside the time I needed to rest was important because that makes me a nicer person and it makes me smarter and I’m more flexible and better able to remember things.”

“I had friends who tried to keep part of their daily or weekly routine...As soon as they could get to gas stations reliably, they were keeping date night. And they might have to drive an hour or two because there wasn’t stuff available nearby, but they were keeping date night. Just to have that one thing that is going to be what you expected.”

“A lot of the stuff I needed to do wasn’t about me, it was about a kid I wanted to help...When you can do something for somebody else, that really refills the tank. And you do have to refill the tank. You can’t run on empty or you won’t be able to do anything.”

“I turned to my faith. My husband and I spent time praying together; reading our Bible...It gave me some comfort during a very uncertain period.”

“There were things that I could reasonably just say, ‘Nope, I’m not going to make it a priority.’ And, I didn’t...Like, some of the pressures of housekeeping and things like that. You know, if stuff’s not so great looking inside your house, it’s okay to not sweep right away. It’ll be alright for another few days...I have friends who went the other way. One of the people I worked with, she would have like bleeding blisters on her hands because she was determined to get everything clean. I just told myself that I know this is not going to be my normal standard of clean, and therefore, I give myself a pass. 100% pass. I’m not dealing with this. And I really think that helped.”

“I did some things I like to do. I like to read, and I probably spent more time reading than I would have ordinarily.”

“I think it’s really nice to have a helping peer group. And it’s important to identify what we mean by ‘peer.’ Like, it meant a lot for us to have conversations among school counselors. I know that within a school setting, a lot of times classroom faculty have those small circles built in. You have ten language arts instructors, and that’s a small enough circle that they can huddle up together. Or, it might be that the sixth grade teachers huddle up together and the seventh and eighth huddle with one another. [But] if you’ve got a couple of counselors or if you’ve got one speech language pathologist, the stuff that they’re dealing with is different still from what the teachers are dealing with; and so they don’t have a partner – they’re completely by themselves and don’t have anybody else as a sounding board at that school. I think in a school district, it’s important to have some chances during recovery for the people in similar impact circles to get together and hear and think through and strategize. I think that’s super important. It just meant a lot to be able to have those conversations with my peers from other schools.”

“The Episcopal Church that we belong to has a natural disaster support curriculum...So very early on, our Bishop came to visit us and did some of the lessons with us as a group for anybody who wanted to participate. We were assigned kind of like a mentor church who had been through something very similar in Gulfport, Mississippi, just outside of our diocese. But they talked with us about [their experiences] when they had been in a similar situation...They sent clergy and lay people several times over a period of weeks and months. That was helpful.”

Some BDS employees, however, were not able to cope as positively.

“I feel like I really didn’t make a lot of time for coping. I felt like I was continuously in this cycle of work. I wasn’t making time to cope and process. It was almost robotic. You didn’t have time to stop. Which I know isn’t healthy, but it was just autopilot. We were just constantly going.”

“Some people that I never knew to be drinkers seemed to be drinking a little bit more, or, in my opinion, a little bit too much.”

“I do know some colleagues who started using substances after the hurricane to I guess kind of numb themselves. I’m not sure how to say it. You know, to kind of forget about all the terrible things they were going through. It wasn’t good. It certainly didn’t help them.”

“I remember [some] folks would get frustrated at other people. But people weren’t telling everybody what they were living through. Like, ‘My home just got washed away and I’ve had to move and I’m in my third home where I’ve had to move to.’ And so, when tempers would get short, other tempers would get short.”

“I know a person who would watch all the hurricane videos, even now, after all of this time. And she wonders why all she thinks about is the devastation of the hurricane. It’s because she just saturates her mind with the horror of what we experienced. Yes, it happened. Yes, it was awful. But if you’re going to get up again, you got to take one step at a time away from it.”

“It didn’t appear healthy for those that kind of just stayed in that constant state of, ‘I have been a victim of this horrific natural event.’ It’s almost like they just wanted to stay there. I think they wanted to just kind of relive it over and over and over again by talking about it. It just seemed like they were spending so

much of their time and resources, their personal resources, on talking about it. It felt like reliving it.”

“People seemed to gain weight. I think there was definitely comfort eating and stress eating and stuff like that going on afterwards [because] people were overwhelmed. There definitely was a lot of people putting on a few pounds. I definitely saw some of that and experienced that myself.”

At times, colleagues noticed when someone was having difficulty coping and tried to steer that person in a direction to get some help.

“I remember [a coworker] looked at me one time and said, ‘You know you’re not okay.’ And at the time, I remember thinking, ‘No. I’m okay. I’m fine.’ And looking back, I wasn’t okay...It’s hard to say how I felt at the time because part of me, it’s almost like I wasn’t even there. Like, I was there, but I wasn’t.”

“I did notice some of my staff was having difficulty dealing with their emotions after the storm. I did have a couple of private conversations on the side where I encouraged them to get help; to find a counselor. I care about them and I was worried. I really felt they needed to see a professional.”

“I get reclusive when I get stressed out. Sometimes I can be a lone wolf and just think I can handle things on my own – and that went into overdrive when the storm happened. I was trying to fix things that were immediately in front of me by myself. And if I did not have what I thought at the time was an intrusive teacher checking on me, I would not have made it. I could have just disappeared into oblivion. I needed somebody to check in on me and hold me accountable to taking care of myself and my family.”

“In those conversations, I talk about hope and how healing is possible...and sometimes just acknowledging that healing is not linear – that there is an upward and downward trajectory. And when we're in those moments that are lower, having someone to talk to and having someone to go to for conversation, ideas and strategies is okay.”

The superintendent and other BDS leaders tried to encourage employees to use positive coping strategies and to seek help from a professional if needed. Some BDS leaders were open about their own experiences seeking mental health services.

“Sometimes I’ll share my personal experience. I don’t know if you know this, but I had a son-in-law that was killed nine years ago in a car accident, and my

daughter was with him. She was seven months pregnant. She had one stitch on her hand and the baby was fine and he was killed. Well, that just rocked my world...With all the thoughts and all the worries that you have about your children, you never think about what if she becomes a widow. And so that just, I mean, that was like a ton of bricks. It hit all of us because he was just an amazing young man. And I tell people, 'Look, I've had luck in those areas all my life. I mean, I was shot at, almost dying, but then when [my son-in-law] was killed, that was just a whole different thing. That was something I was never prepared for. And I sought some extra help. I met with a counselor. I had my whole family meet with the counselor. And I am so glad I did that. And that's why I encourage people to do so as well. Even if I don't know the person, I will open up and be honest with them and tell them, 'Look, I don't think it's a bad idea. I did this and I consider myself a strong person. I did this and I think this is where you need to be.'"

"I have been getting counseling since the hurricane. I was having a lot of trouble dealing with things, and my wife told me that I needed help. I will tell you, it might be the smartest thing I have ever done. And so, when someone asks me if I think seeing a counselor is a good idea, I don't even hesitate to tell them yes. I know some people may have different experiences. But for me, it has been a true blessing."

"I think the hurricane has helped us become more aware of people taking care of themselves. And I'm not just talking about physically but mentally as well. Part of my responsibility is to make sure we get the message out there that your mental health and wellness are just as important as your physical health."

"Getting counseling and reaching out for that support was [were] refreshing and calming. It was what I needed in order for me to be able to pour back into my students. I was running on empty. I was low; and I could not find positive words to say in my own interactions with staff and students; and I needed a moment to connect with my counselor so that I could continue to replenish myself enough to pour back into my students and other staff."

The district had some existing mental health services for employees in place prior to the hurricane, which included an in-house Employee Assistance Program (EAP), therapy services provided through insurance, and additional therapy services accessible through a union program. However, it seemed that many employees in need of services were not utilizing these resources.

"Our EAP program at the time was not being used much for mental health. And we could see that many of our employees needed that kind of assistance. As time

went on, many were struggling more and more. And so we were wondering why a lot of these resources we had in place were not being used much.”

BDS leaders commissioned a survey to better understand the barriers that were preventing staff from seeking help and to have a better understanding of where employees preferred to receive services.

Results from the survey indicated the most significant barriers preventing employees from receiving mental health services included the following:

- Time
 - Confidentiality concerns
 - Worries about impacts on career
 - Stigma
 - Lack of knowledge of available mental health services
 - Not knowing how to access and navigate the services
-

“We also found was that people weren’t recognizing that they were in crisis. And so sometimes they were pushing away the support that we gave them because they didn’t realize that they themselves were in crisis, and they needed to talk to someone.”

“People didn’t reach out. Whether you are a teacher or a principal or whatever, there’s an expectation that you’re the one that’s helping other people. And I think that maybe people didn’t reach out for the support they needed because they were trying to be the one that was helping the kids or the other people.”

Results also indicated that a significant majority of BDS employees preferred to receive mental health services from a provider unaffiliated with the district due to confidentiality concerns.

“The survey results showed that a majority of BDS staff [over 72%] preferred to access mental health services at off-site locations within the community. This made sense given the concerns regarding confidentiality, impacts on employment and stigma expressed by staff in the survey. Similarly, the vast majority of BDS staff [over 73%] expressed a preference to obtain mental health services from a service provider independent of the school district. Again, this speaks to issues of trust and confidentiality.”

BDS leadership used the survey results to enhance mental health messaging, services, and other resources for their employees. A significant lesson learned from the survey pointed to the important role outside providers play in supporting the mental health needs of school district

staff in normal times and when a disaster happens. Results also highlighted the importance of providing a range of services and delivery options from which employees could choose.

“The survey provided a blueprint for us to do a better job in supporting the mental health needs of our staff. We made some changes that I think has [have] been positive.”

“We set up outside counseling sessions for employees. We also offered some group sessions at different schools for folks that wanted to come in and talk. We’re trying to increase the communication about mental health and mental health supports and to include the message of, ‘It’s okay to not be okay and to ask for help.’”

The following are some of the mental health services and resources brought in to support BDS employees after Hurricane Michael:

Project Hope: Project Hope was a short-term, FEMA-funded, community-wide emergency mental health services program that provided crisis counseling in Bay County and other areas impacted by Hurricane Michael. As part of Project Hope, several crisis response groups were held in various BDS schools, upon request. Some groups met only once, while others met multiple times. Most meetings were held on campus after regular school hours. Taking advantage of the service was optional for school personnel. The purpose of these groups was to provide mental health first aid and response to the crisis as well as to refer people to other disaster recovery services.

Educator’s EAP: BDS sought to enhance and expand its existing employee assistance services by contracting with the Educator’s EAP after Hurricane Michael. The Educator’s EAP is a comprehensive and completely confidential service that included remote counseling services (online or telephone) provided by licensed therapists who had previously worked in an educational setting themselves. The service also included access to a comprehensive library of informational trainings to help people with other needed topics such as finances, divorce, adoption, legal issues, nutrition, and health, etc.

Expanded Mental Health Services at Bay Educators Wellness Center: The district had opened a wellness center to support employees several years before Hurricane Michael. This resource allowed personnel with an illness or minor injury to be seen for free so that they could return to school as quickly as possible. After the hurricane, BDS expanded the contract for the Bay Educators Wellness Center to include a full-time licensed therapist on staff. The therapist provided counseling opportunities for BDS staff and their families as well as psychoeducation during and after school hours.

Blissful Breaks: Blissful Breaks were a series of monthly opportunities to show care and appreciation for the stress that school personnel were experiencing. Triad team members at each school ran the Blissful Breaks. All school personnel were invited to participate. The groups

were lighthearted with snacks and activities, but they also included acknowledgment of the challenges that educators and administrators were experiencing and offered some tips on how to cope with and reduce stress.

Teacher Calm Rooms: Several schools in BDS created “teacher calm rooms.” These were a room in the school with comfy chairs and relaxing décor and often included snacks or other refreshments. It was a safe space where teachers and other staff could go for some quiet and calm in the middle of a stressful school day.

“I think we're more aware of mental health and wellness of not just our students but for our employees as well. We're trying to do more to help them and to get them to realize the challenges that they might be facing right now are not the end of the world. That there are resources and help is available.”



Due to the trauma caused by Hurricane Michael’s destruction, many students continued to struggle with mental health issues (Jordan, 2019). Image source: Briney King, “Mental Health Struggles Abound In The Panhandle, One Year After Hurricane Michael,” 2019. <https://news.wfsu.org/state-news/2019-10-07/mental-health-struggles-abound-in-the-panhandle-one-year-after-hurricane-michael>.

Student Mental Health

Disasters impact the mental health of youth as well as adults. Many youth have difficulty coping with a disaster because they do not have the life experience or coping skills to deal with their emotions stemming from the event. This is one reason why it is important to provide mental health support to youth following a disaster or other traumatic event.

“The things that I’ve heard my friends and colleagues describe, I just can’t even begin to imagine my kids experiencing that. So hearing their personal stories, I know that our students experienced a lot. And that, rightfully so, they’re going to have anxiety, even during a thunderstorm.”

Supporting youth mental health means also supporting parents and other caregivers.

“I think you have to support and work with the parents and other adults in the children’s lives as well because they play such an important role on how a child recovers from a disaster – positively or negatively. I would recommend that other school districts offer mental health information and training to parents after a disaster because they will need it. You’ve got to build up all of the supports surrounding the children, and that includes the adults in their lives.”

This is not always easy.

“I just think there’s a whole segment of our community that has given up. I think they’re feeling hopeless because it’s been so hard just to exist for the last three years. So they’re not coming to the celebration at their kid’s school, and they’re not dialing in to see what their child made on a math test because they’re simply just trying to survive and they’re exhausted.”

“There were a number of parents that just checked out after the storm. We couldn’t get them engaged in anything about their kids --not even to give consent for counseling services when it was clear the child would benefit and it wouldn’t cost them a dime.”

Yet with a little help from parents, caregivers, educators, school-based mental health professionals and other caring adults, most students were able to cope positively with their reactions after Hurricane Michael.

“I could see [my daughter] was struggling after the storm. She was having trouble falling sleep and sometimes had nightmares. So I taught her some breathing exercises that would help calm her down. And we would practice those

before she went to bed. First, I showed her how to do them, and then we would do them together. She said that helped her.”

“My 9-year-old is the artistic one in the family. She actually took pieces of shattered glass from our vehicle and a couple of windows and she glued those into her art. She described her art as making something beautiful even though it was from something shattered. She said, ‘Mommy, we can make this better now.’”

“After the storm, my son learned how to use some of the tools and things that my husband was using to clean up our property. His coping was more about problem-solving and being a part of the conversation about how to rebuild.”

“I did some of the activities from the After The Storm book with my son, and we really found them helpful. My son especially liked the role playing activity. I had to pretend I was mad, and he gave me ideas on how I could deal with my angry feelings in a good way. I would definitely recommend parents going through that entire book with their kids.”

A significant number of BDS students, however, needed professional counseling services to cope with their reactions. Unfortunately, many students in need of mental health services within the first year after the hurricane were not able to receive them. Numerous families reported being unable to obtain services from a community-based provider due to lengthy waitlists or barriers related to time, cost, or transportation.

“I could tell a few of my students were getting worse. And the school social worker and I tried to intervene and talked with the parents to make sure the kids were getting help. But two of the families said they couldn’t get an appointment to see a therapist. I remember one family telling me [a provider] scheduled an appointment like 4 months later. That’s ridiculous. That kid needed help immediately. The kids weren’t getting help because no one could see them.”

“One parent told me he wanted his child to have counseling in the school because he didn’t have a way to get to someone in the community. The family didn’t have a car, and there were no providers nearby. The problem was we didn’t have an option for services in the school at the time.”

Another key factor was the lack of additional school-based mental health professionals to provide services directly on campuses.

“We knew what we needed – mental health professionals in the schools. That was the best way we were going to get these kids the help they needed. But no matter how much we asked for help, no one gave us the funding. It wasn’t until after things got really, really bad that we finally got the help we had been asking for, like two years later.”

Without professional counseling services, the mental health condition of many youth continued to worsen over time, as did challenges in the classrooms.

“I had one student who we knew needed counseling, but for whatever reason didn’t get the counseling. Her behavior and outbursts just got worse and worse. She was getting more disruptive with each passing week, and it began to affect the whole class. She needed help and wasn’t getting it, and it affected everyone.”

“It was heartbreaking watching the kids slowly deteriorate. And even worse to know I was pretty much helpless to help them.”

Under-resourced, the schools were unable to address the problem.

“Part of the problem was we just didn’t have the right folks, the right resources in place to help. We needed mental health professionals in the schools and in the classrooms working with the kids. We needed training on how to deal with these abnormal behaviors and situations. But we didn’t get the help in time, and things just kept spiraling out of control. I’m a veteran teacher. I’ve been teaching for almost 20 years. I’d never seen anything like it. There were days when I literally went home and cried. Everything I tried did not work. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“At one point we had a list of well over 600 kids who had received mental health referrals waiting to receive services. That’s over 600 kids who were in bad shape and not getting any help whatsoever for months on end!”

Eventually, a full blown mental health crisis emerged.

“There’s no other way to say it other than it was a crisis. It was a straight up crisis. We were not able to get most of the kids the help they needed in time. And the calls for help started coming in from the teachers. The Baker Acts went sky high. The behavioral referrals shot way up. And you can look at all that data and say, ‘Wow, this looks bad.’ But the data didn’t nearly reflect how bad things had really gotten.”

“The amount of violence was something I had never seen before. I mean, we had kids as young as first and second grades coming to school threatening to kill themselves. We’re not used to kids at that age saying things like that. And those weren’t isolated instances.”

“The Baker Acts, the disciplinary referrals, the requests for assistance from educators in their classrooms – everything was just off the charts. We just put out fires all day, every day. That’s all we were doing.”

“Even some of my students who usually didn’t cause trouble were causing problems. I knew a couple of these kids for several years, and I can tell you never once did they have a discipline problem before. It seemed that the world had turned upside down after the hurricane. The kids were just out of control.”

“Before the storm, teachers at some of our schools had maybe two or three kids in each classroom who were experiencing some sort of crisis, like parents getting divorced, families getting evicted, a grandmother dying, that kind of stuff. And after the storm, I think that became like 75% of their kids if not more. And so that has manifested itself in behavior and attendance and academic achievements and all of those things.”

“We had kindergarteners and first-graders that we were having to do suicide assessments on. We were having conversations with a lot of kids about serious situations. So, I think the mental health issues really increased in severity.”

This threw an element of disarray into the entire school district.

“We were no longer in the business of teaching and learning. It was all about putting out fires. I would come in; and literally from the moment I walked in the door until the moment I left, it was one crisis after another. Never seen anything like it. My teachers couldn’t teach. Our students couldn’t learn. Kids that we never saw a problem from before were acting out. It’s just – I can’t even explain it properly. In all my years of being in education, I’ve seen anything like it. And you can forget about academics. We needed more counseling. We needed more SEL programming. We needed help!”

Classroom environments became severely disrupted.

“Education was not happening. On some days there was no way to get through even a single lesson. I would help a child through one crisis, and two minutes

later another one would happen. It was so stressful for me but also heartbreaking. My babies needed help. It wasn't their fault."

"We pretty much ceased teaching. I mean, we tried. But, it wasn't happening. I was spending all my time dealing with kids who were crying or fighting or acting out in other ways. Some would jump under their desks at the slightest sound of thunder or sudden noise...Me and the other teachers were doing everything we could just to get through the day. It was just, whew, it was really bad."

The mental health crisis didn't just impact students. It impacted adults as well.

"Most of the time a student might encounter one adult during the day that has had a bad experience or that is struggling. But with this hurricane, every adult they encountered was struggling in some manner...So, the children were surrounded by people that were struggling...The adults were in their own crisis."

"Everyone was affected by it. At our school, we unfortunately had students, parents, and even faculty Baked Acted on site. That's how bad things were. No one was immune from it."

A number of educators, many who were struggling with their own reactions from the storm, were unable to cope with the crisis and decided to leave their positions.

"I had one friend and knew of several other teachers who quit their jobs at the district because they just couldn't take it anymore. Things were that bad in some classrooms. My friend told me she did everything she could to make the situation better and nothing worked. She went into counseling herself. And her therapist recommended she quit her job. I don't think it was anything she'd ever considered before. But she had to for her own health."

"I wound up having a nervous breakdown and just saying, 'That's it. I quit!' And so, I've literally never done this before in my life, but I walked off the job and just went home and sat in my bedroom for days at a time. Just really upset...I just shut down. I was not in a really good spot for about I would say a year and a half, until I got back into my house."

Many believe the mental health crisis was preventable had the proper resources been in place in a timely manner.

"Had we gotten the funding for the resources we needed when we were first asking, I am 1000% certain we would have avoided the mental health crisis."

Absolutely. No doubt. And it makes me upset even to this day to think all of this was preventable.”

“The brush fire is a great example. You know, it started out as a little brush fire and now its 12,000 acres. I mean, that's the way the mental health thing is. You can surround these people and love them and take care of them and get them the help they need, or you can just let it fester and just let it keep growing. If that fire would have been put out right away, it wouldn't be 12,000 acres now...And if we had gotten the money for mental health when we first asked, we wouldn't have been in the bad situation we got into.”

It wasn't until the district finally received the support it had been requesting that it was able to begin to address the mental health crisis in earnest.



Building Capacity to Address Mental Health Needs



A local hospital building is severely damaged by Hurricane Michael (Webb, 2018).

Building Capacity to Address Mental Health

BDS was awarded its first grant for mental health about a year after Hurricane Michael made landfall. But it took longer for the district to acquire enough funding to make a real impact on the mental health crisis.

“The Project SERV and RESTART grants were the two big ones that we got that really gave us the resources to make a dent in the mental health crisis. Don’t get me wrong; we greatly appreciate every dollar we got from everyone else. Every dollar and every other resource we got made a difference. But, the crisis was so big by that point that we needed resources to the tune of millions of dollars to deal with the crisis.”

“There’s always a delay from when you receive notice of the award until services actually start. Like for our Triad program, for example, because we had to hire and train a lot of mental health professionals, that delay was about 4 months. So, you have to account for that in your planning. You don’t just get the money and start services the next day. There will be a delay.”

Once the funding did become available, the district focused on building capacity to address not only the existing mental health crisis but also to enhance mental health programming for the long-term. To do this, the district looked to augment its existing services, implement innovative new programs, and bring in additional resources.

Trauma Sensitive Classrooms Project

LOCAL

Bay District Schools starts program to improve students' well-being

Tony Mixon The News Herald
Published 6:45 a.m. ET Oct. 30, 2020

Bay District Schools implements programs to improve student well-being (Mixon, 2020).

It is normal for one or two students occasionally to exhibit challenging behaviors at various times during the school day. Educators are well-trained and prepared to handle such instances. However, the behavior challenges that Bay District Schools experienced in the wake of Hurricane Michael were anything but common. It was on a scale never before seen within the school district.

"I was used to having one, maybe two kids at most having a bad day. Now it was like 50% or 75% of the class! I would have 4 or 5 kids melting down at the same time. It was crazy. I couldn't handle it."

"In all my years of teaching and in administration, I had never experienced anything like that before. I think for most of the 2019-2020 school year, up until COVID shut everything down, me and my AP were spending most of our time deescalating kids who were having a crisis. And then we were consoling our teachers the rest of the time."

"It's totally different. The kids are more hostile than what they used to be. I was in a classroom today, and I looked around and thought, 'This is one of my best teachers, and she is struggling to get all of the kids popping-off under control, and there are three adults in the room.' So this has been really hard, especially with the teachers being so tired."

Without the proper resources, many schools were unable to address or even get ahead of the problem. The situation deteriorated over time.

"It's kind of this vicious cycle. We didn't have what we needed to address the challenges as they arose. We also didn't have the resources to get on the front end of these problems and implement preventative measures. We were just in survival mode and putting out fires every single day."

"It was getting pretty bad...to the point where it was like you just couldn't even keep up with the volume of the requests for help. At one point, the lines were so blurred between what was truly behavior-related and what was mental health-

related. Like, where do you start? Is it the chicken or the egg? Are we working on mental health? Are we working on behavior? Is it both? We just felt like we were spinning our wheels.”

Addressing the abnormal behaviors required a new approach. When the district finally received funding, 7-Dippity was tasked with finding a solution.

“We had to do something different because what we were doing wasn’t working. All that training I had never prepared me for what I was dealing with.”

7-Dippity conducted a national search to identify a partner who could support the school district. Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, Dr. Elizabeth Connors is an expert in implementing evidence-based approaches in schools to promote student emotional wellbeing and resilience to adversity, stress and trauma, was recommended as a partner. Dr. Connors and 7-Dippity teamed up to develop an initiative to help the schools address the extreme behaviors. The initiative became known as the Trauma Sensitive Classrooms Project (TSC).

“We were looking for someone with a unique blend of knowledge, experience, and willingness to think outside-the-box. As soon as we spoke with Dr. Connors, we knew we found that person. Dr. Connors and her team at Yale have been nothing short of exceptional in all areas.”

Given the circumstances, the consultation team knew that implementing an entirely new curriculum was not feasible. The administrators and educators needed a few, very specific and very effective strategies that they could use to help gauge the temperature of the classrooms, to determine what was bothering the students to prevent a situation from escalating into a crisis, and to respond effectively to a child who may already be in crisis.

“The TSC project was purposefully designed to be bite-sized. People in crisis cannot absorb a lot of new information. We wanted to make sure that what we did provide was targeted and effective. Everything was empirically-based and done with a purpose.”

Once those strategies were identified, the team then had to determine how best to train the school staff in implementing them. One of the biggest challenges was that the staff was already overwhelmed. Many were in a state of crisis themselves. The question became, “How can you effectively train school staff on becoming more sensitive to trauma when they were in their own state of crisis?”

“Before the storm, I think you could say most of our teachers were in a good place emotionally. I mean, independently one or two of them may have been

going through a divorce or something like that, but for the most part, most were pretty stable people. So, after the storm, you basically had hurt people trying to take care of hurt people. And that's just a recipe for a mess."

It was determined a multi-stepped approach would be taken to implementation. The first step was to try to address some of the stress and anxiety many of the school staff had been experiencing. Before any training began, the employees were offered the opportunity to participate in "Roundtable Discussions." These discussions provided a way for staff to "let off some steam" in a structured and constructive way while offering a few helpful self-care and positive coping strategies. The discussions were offered to all school staff. Participation was voluntary, and employees could choose to take part in either group or individual discussions. A team of trained mental health professionals led each discussion.

"I think people really found the Roundtable Discussions useful. Not everyone in the school participated. And that's okay. But I think that those who did find them quite helpful. I know the feedback we received was very positive – both from the participants and the mental health professionals who were facilitating."

The second step of the project involved initial implementation of the TSC strategies in a school over a one-week period. During this phase, professional development for school staff was provided toward the beginning of the week followed by implementation support the rest of the week. Trained "facilitators" worked with assigned educators to help plan, model, and assist in implementation of the TSC strategies in each classroom. This component was purposely designed to provide as much hands-on interaction and support as possible.

"I think the biggest reason why the project was so successful was the facilitators working hands-on with the school staff. Having that one-on-one support from a facilitator was so valuable for the educators; spending that time together as a team, without judgment, was critical. The facilitators helped model the TSC strategies and assisted the educators until they felt comfortable doing the strategies themselves."

"The support we got was amazing. I wish all trainings had this type of support. My facilitator was incredible. She really took the time to demonstrate the strategies until I felt comfortable with them and worked with me in figuring out a plan that was best for my classroom. The whole experience was incredible. Highly recommend other schools using this project."

After the initial one-week implementation was completed, the third step of the project began. This step focused on long-term support. School-based facilitators continued ongoing support for their assigned educators while the Yale/7-Dippity team provided periodic additional mentoring, consultation, and training for both the facilitators and educators.

“The following year after the TSC project was implemented at [our school], we did see a significant difference in a very positive way. Our educators were more aware of some of their students’ issues and were better able to handle behavioral problems in their classrooms without having to call us in for support. The number of disciplinary referrals started declining. I think the atmosphere as a whole was just better. The project also allowed me to gain a better relationship with many of my peers.”

“The TSC project really helped our school. It was great to see the ‘light bulb’ go off for some of our educators – that maybe some of their students were dealing with some things they didn’t anticipate or know about – that some of the behavior was not really being defiant but coming from somewhere else. I really feel we are much more trauma informed now.”

“I really liked the COOL strategy. That was my favorite. I have used it many times in my classroom as a de-escalation technique. And it helps remind me to take care of myself, too, which is something I really didn’t do before.”

The TSC project was one innovative program implemented by BDS after the hurricane to support the psychosocial needs of students and staff. Another key program was the Triad Initiative.

Triad Initiative

The Triad initiative was originally conceived when the psychosocial assessment surveys indicated significant levels of post-disaster depression, anxiety, and emotional trauma in BDS students and staff, coupled with the loss of capacity from community-based service providers. BDS leadership fought hard to obtain funding to bring in additional school-based mental health professionals who could deliver essential mental health support services on campuses. They knew that providing the services in the schools would lower many of the barriers that might otherwise prevent the students from getting care.

“We knew we needed mental health professionals who could provide services right there on the campuses. We knew that was going to be the best way to help these kids deal with their mental health issues. This was not a slight to our community partners at all. They were great and doing the best they could. But the need was overwhelming. And we had to meet those kids where they were at – in our schools.”

“Having the mental health folks provide counseling in the schools removed a lot of the barriers that usually prevented the kids from getting those kinds of services. They don’t have to rely on their parents to take them somewhere in the community. We just had to get consent. Sometimes getting the consent form signed was a challenge. But way more kids were able to receive the mental health services by having it in the schools than who would have otherwise.”

Thanks to a RESTART grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Triad initiative was finally able to be implemented.

“That RESTART grant really was a turning point for us. That funding allowed us to bring the Triad program to life. We were able to place mental health professionals directly into the schools and that made all the difference.”

The name for the “Triad” model came from the initial plan of embedding a team of three people within each school.

- (1) A bachelor’s level support team member who served primarily as a first responder to help manage student behaviors on campus, to serve as a case manager, and to provide an extra layer of support to students, educators, families, and other team members.
- (2) A master’s level mental health professional team member who focused on Tier 2 mental health services and supported screening, psychoeducation, targeted therapeutic social skills groups, and problem-solving with educators.

- (3) A licensed mental health professional who focused on Tier 3 mental health services, including providing individual therapy for students, crisis response, referrals for additional care, training for educators, and participation in MTSS data chats.

Supporting the Triads were a number of team leaders who were each assigned a cluster of school-based Triad teams to work with and supervise. The team leaders in turn reported to and were supported by a district level mental health coordinator.

“We purposefully built layers of support into the model. In this way, we were able to best assist our teams in the schools while also having the bandwidth to deal with critical emergencies if and when they occurred.”

The Triads supported the students and schools in a number of ways.

“The Triads work to strengthen core behavior supports in the school, provide more intensive SEL intervention, and introduce crisis de-escalation and therapeutic mental health interventions for those in need of clinical mental health support. There is a spectrum of support services, ranging from basic mentoring and check and connect, to structured social emotional learning instruction service to therapeutic mental health. Triads also work in collaboration with community mental health [agencies] to refer out for long-term, clinically therapeutic services not appropriate in the school-based model. [They] coordinate intensified wrap-around services, including sharing data and strategies with the identified community mental health agencies with consent...[They also] coordinate and utilize community providers in person and [via] telehealth models to provide student access to mental health counselors and physicians with parent consent [in the school].”

BDS leadership was initially concerned that they would not be able to find enough mental health professionals to fill all the open positions. However, that notion was soon dispelled as an outpouring of resumes flooded into the district. Many professionals were excited to work with and help BDS students.

“I can tell you in no way, shape, or form did I think we were going to find enough people to fill all those Triad positions. I would have bet some serious money that was not going to happen. Well, I was wrong. They came out of the woodworks. Who knew?”

The initial Triad hiring process provided BDS administrators with experience that helped inform future hiring efforts.

“There should be job descriptions that do not limit masters-level pay to only MSW. Masters in counseling, psychology, and other mental health fields should be considered in the equivalent pay scale as social workers. The same should also be said of BSW and Bachelors of Psychology or other mental health-related fields.”

“If you hire registered licensed interns, you should have a policy to address their 5,000 hour requirement of face-to-face psychotherapy to be completed by supplementation with work done outside of work hours with community providers.”

“We did get pushback from some of our community partners who had staff who wanted to work directly for the BDS Triads. It is something to expect and you should be prepared to address if your school district expects to hire a lot of local mental health professionals.”

All new Triad members went through a rigorous initial orientation and training program. Ongoing training was then provided throughout the school year.

“We trained all of our clinicians in CBITS and Bounce Back.”

“We continue professional development and support for our team members in CBT and Trauma Sensitive school efforts.”

“We have developed a procedural coaching manual and do weekly staffings for all new incoming referral evaluations and treatment plans within our school cluster teams.”

The training regimen has since been refined as new topics for professional development are identified.

“We found that basic understanding of community mental health and school-based behavioral support services caused great confusion as to what Triad team members could do on school campus without consent. As a result, there was ongoing clarification and communication with all stakeholders in defining what educationally relevant school-based mental health services were and how to provide them responsibly in the school setting.”

“We are adding substance prevention, use and abuse motivational interviewing, and Stanford group counseling to address substance use on campuses.”

Over time, the structure of the school-based Triad teams has also shifted as needs and circumstances warrant.

“The Triad concept was initially three people -- bachelors, masters and clinical mental health providers at each school providing a continuum of behavioral health services. Since then, we have found that each school's needs differ, and staff should reflect these school needs. The Triad concept is now a whole child collaborative that focuses on the behavioral, social, and wellness needs of all students. Not all schools need three full time people or one in each category. Staffing decisions are based on the number of monthly average de-escalation calls, number of Community of Care referrals per year, Baker Acts per year, and ODR rates per year.”

The Triads were recently integrated into a broader district initiative aimed at supporting student wellness.

“The Triads were formed to assist with an increased need for student and staff wellness support during the recovery effort. [Today], Triads are part of the larger BDS Comprehensive Student Wellness Program, which is a coordinated effort between professional school counselors, behavior MTSS, Student Wellness Programs, and community mental health partners.”

Overall, the Triad initiative has been a huge success.

“We have provided 100% of BDS students equitable access to social, behavioral, and mental health services to support social, emotional and academic well-being through collaboration and coordination of comprehensive, evidence based, mental health intervention and services of the highest quality.”

“The Triads have been nothing short of lifesaving; literally. I can’t tell you how much help they have been – not only for our students but our entire school team here as well. I honestly don’t know how we existed without them. They are just amazing.”

“I can tell you that the Triad folks at our school are amazing. Two of my students

have been receiving help from them, and it has made a world of difference -- like night and day. For sure the counseling has been helping them a lot.”

The Triad teams continue to be helpful beyond their initial intention.

“The Triads have been invaluable – not just with the hurricane but also supporting our students during the COVID-19 pandemic. I can’t say enough how incredible they have been.”

“Academically, I don’t think many of our students would be where they are at without the Triads. I can tell you that for certain. If you ever want to see a link between mental health and academics, look no further than our school.”

“We were so lucky to have had our Triad team in place when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. They have been an amazing resource in supporting the students and families and our own staff through the disruptions and stress. I don’t know how other schools without Triads have been able to manage through the pandemic.”

While new initiatives such as the TSC Project and the Triads provided significant support in the wake of Hurricane Michael, the district also looked inward to see which existing programs and resources could be enhanced to meet the expanded needs of students and staff. One focus area for the district was the professional school counselor program.



Professional School Counselors

Disasters often expose weaknesses or deficiencies in systems. Even areas that may have worked well prior to the event may not be as effective after. BDS learned that school districts must periodically take an unbiased look inward after a disaster to identify areas needing improvement. This is a critical step to having an effective long-term disaster response.

“We had to take an honest look at ourselves to see what was working well and what was not after the storm. Part of this involved the assessments that our consultants conducted. We also held interdepartmental meetings where we just talked about some of the challenges we were seeing.”

Some of the existing weaknesses within the school district were revealed almost immediately after the storm. Others were more subtle or bubbled up at a later time.

“You know, some issues popped up right away, and we had to quickly deal with those -- like the communication problems we had right after the storm, for example. But, other major challenges, like the mental health, came out a bit later. And, we didn’t know where our limitations were with that until the crisis started deepening, and we could see that the systems we had in place were woefully inadequate.”

For example, BDS’s existing system of internal and external supports to address the mental health needs of students was clearly inadequate after the hurricane. Enhanced capacity was needed. With the assistance of consultants, the district conducted a review of internal supports. Professional school counselors were identified as an underutilized resource that could provide much-needed mental health assistance to students.

“After the hurricane, because of the trauma experienced by so many, there was a tremendous increase in the community and staff’s understanding of the impact of trauma...and the need for school counselors to be available to provide emotional support to others.”

But before the school counselors could be utilized to their “full potential,” the current system had to be changed so that the school counselors could focus on providing mental health supports to students instead of spending their time on non-counseling duties.

“One of the challenges was that our school counselors were not being used to ‘counsel’ students. They were tasked with doing a lot of other duties. And so here was this vital resource that we desperately needed and already had in-house but wasn’t being used in the way we needed it to be.”

“Because BDS is a site-based managed district, each principal determines the role of the professional school counselor at that school... There was not a lot of consistency across campuses with the role of the professional school counselors.”

The district brought in Dr. Ernest Cox, a consultant who specializes in improving school counseling programs. Dr. Cox helped the district conduct a thorough review of the school counseling department and develop a comprehensive, multi-year improvement plan.

“We began receiving the consultation services of Ernest Cox. I believe that Ernest has been instrumental in many of the mindset and framework changes we have been changing in BDS. He was able to work with all school counselors who shared their voices to comprise our vision, mission, and plan of progress. He gave us permission to grow by acknowledging that we weren’t where we needed to be in order to meet the great needs of our students following the storm.”

For the effort to be a success, it was critical to get the buy-in of school counselors from across the district.

“We made sure that what we were doing was built from the voices of those in the field. In other words, we involved our professional school counselors at every level of our decision making and kept in communication with them so they knew what was going on.”

Establishing Counselor Leadership Teams (CLT) and Counselor Pods was an important part of ensuring school counselors had a voice in all aspects of the project.

“We initiated a Counselor Leadership Team to serve as the planning team for the department... The Counselor Leadership Team [is] composed of school counselors representing all levels and geographical areas of the district... They bring other voices to the decision making and assist in sharing the information out with the whole department.”

“Each CLT member leads a ‘Counselor Pod’ of level-like peers where they can vent, share practice, laugh, and encourage each other. The CLT members then bring back questions or concerns anonymously [to] the department. This has increased the collaboration between counselors on different campuses and has helped us unify as a department.”

The district began to implement a model created by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) aimed at providing the school counselors with more time to deliver direct counseling services.

“Ernest was instrumental in assisting our whole school counseling department with developing a vision and mission statement. We followed the ASCA model in trying to move our department to increase time in direct student services and decrease time on non-counseling duties. This work had the voice of every school counselor in the district, and it greatly increased the collaboration between schools.”

Professional development was provided to build the school counselors’ capacity to better understand and support the mental health needs of students in the aftermath of the storm.

“We provided a number of different professional development workshops for our staff after the storm, including targeted trainings for our school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists. A number of trainings focused on trauma and how disasters like hurricanes affect students and staff.”

Some of the trainings included the following:

“Psychological First Aid – online 3-hour webinar by the Florida Department of Education for those school counselors (and others) who could participate...This provided information that could be used on a mobile device to assist students and adults.

Supporting Student Recovery Following Hurricane Michael – all day training for all school counselors by Frank Zenere (School Psychologist and the District Coordinator of Crisis Management for Miami-Dade County Public Schools). This was an excellent overview of the trauma that everyone had experienced with an emphasis on how school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers can provide support to students and adults processing their trauma. There was great information about what to watch for and what to expect at different stages.

Suicide Risk Assessment and Postvention Training – all day training for all school counselors (and others) by Frank Zenere. This training was to assist school counselors (and others) in being prepared for the possibility of increased suicidal ideation post-hurricane. They were trained in how to administer the Columbia and SAFE-T, which are suicide-risk assessments.

Trauma 101/102 – by Mental Health America of Greater Houston...This was to train [the school counselors] as ‘trainers’ to implement Trauma 101/102 with administrators, teachers, and other staff.

CBITS/Bounce Back – this provided updated short-term solution focused counseling training in CBITS and Bounce Back for our school counselors. Much of the materials can be used outside of a CBITS or Bounce Back group in counseling sessions with individual students or adults. We were trying to add more ‘tools’ to their toolkit.”

The district remained mindful that many school counselors were still coping with their own experiences and recovery challenges from the storm.

“School counselors were trying to survive their own losses and trauma. We were all in shock and survival mode.”

Supporting the school counselors’ own mental health needs was an important component to the recovery plan.

“We were constantly pouring into our families and our students. But we also needed to recognize that we needed to pour some into ourselves. Self-care is important; and the care of others is important; and being able to balance all that was a unique situation. We need to be able to reach out when we need it and say, ‘This is too much for me right at this moment. Help me carry this load.’ But this is not something that a school counselor typically says, because we want to hold it all in. We want to help others. That’s what we’re here for...But as a school counselor, I needed to learn that sometimes I needed the help just as much as any of my students sitting across from me did...The storm challenged me to recognize that even though I was living that crisis, and I was doing a job that supported others going through it. I needed support myself.”

Because school counselors heard many stories from students and colleagues, coping with compassion fatigue was on everyone’s mind.

“You do get compassion fatigue. It’s natural; it’s human. We listened to so many stories from students and staff. Everyone wanted to tell their story, and we were the ones they coming to share them with.”

“School counselors often had to put their personal business and processing to the side while at school in order to focus on students and staff needs. They would ‘keep it together’ during school because they were so busy focusing on others

and then would sometimes get home and become very emotional as they tried to deal with their own losses, grief, trauma [and] business. Of course, hearing all the stories of others also weighed on them.”

BDS made sure that numerous supports were available to school counselors as well as other employees. Self-care was highly encouraged and modeled by leadership.

“We have a list of providers. We have a wellness center. We have mental health counselors on our campuses that can make recommendations. And, we also have The Educators EAP, which is a helpline and a contact for our employees to utilize; and they have counselors available to them.”

“Change” is a long-term process. Systems that have functioned in a certain manner over an extended period of time can be difficult to transform, particularly in the aftermath of a disaster. However, disasters can also provide the impetus for change. BDS learned that sometimes “change” happens incrementally, and it was okay to accept that the process may go slower than many would like.

“We haven't arrived, but we are seeing movement at some schools, excitement in voices, and a comradery that was not as evident before. We continue to advocate for increasing time in direct student services and decreasing non-counseling tasks. We get acknowledgement from the ‘powers that be,’ but they haven't found a way to reallocate some of the non-counseling duties assigned yet. We continue to be hopeful.”

The district’s efforts were already paying dividends when the COVID-19 pandemic started.

“The hard work we did post-hurricane actually made us more prepared than other districts for the pandemic that occurred.”

“We really didn’t know how far we had come since we started the process until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It was then that we really got to see how far we had come, and how we were already doing things that other school counselors in other districts are only just now starting to plan for. We were definitely ahead of the game. And we can thank the hurricane for that.”

The school counseling department improvement plan is being implemented over a multi-year period. While much progress has been made, there is still more to go.

“We are definitely moving in the right direction. We haven’t reached the end of the line yet, but we have the momentum to take us there.”

Some additional lessons learned by the school counseling department after Hurricane Michael include the following:

Be patient with yourself and others. While it will take everyone to accomplish all that is necessary, everyone is also dealing with their own personal trauma. There will be times that each person will need to step back and take care of him or herself. Hopefully, he or she will gain strength and step back in. Everyone processes trauma differently. There are no 'right' or "wrong' ways. Be compassionate with yourself and others.

Continue to check on one another. The 'strong' person may need as much help as the 'emotional' person.

Know that 'academics' will need to take a back seat for a time. While students thrive with structure, you will have to be flexible because there will be many adjustments that will need to occur.

It's easy to become overwhelmed, so just work through 'right now.' You have to just put one foot in front of the other and do one thing at a time.

Look for opportunities to celebrate or develop gratitude. While there are many difficulties, look for the blessings in the midst – the helpers, the donations, the beautiful sunset that can be seen now that the trees are gone, the beach that is now visible that wasn't before, the garbage truck arriving 6 weeks after the storm to collect the stacks of garbage lining the street, the first warm shower, the return of electricity, etc.

In addition to the TSC Project, Triads, and revamping the Professional School Counselor Department, BDS administrators sought to build capacity further through professional development.

Professional Development

Professional development (PD) is a key way to build school district capacity to address challenges associated with a disaster.

“We found out after the hurricane that we needed a lot of training in a lot of different areas to help deal with what we were experiencing.”

In retrospect, some BDS staff would have preferred to have received some training before the hurricane occurred.

“It would be amazing if there was a training for [Student Services Directors] on how to prepare for and recover from a disaster. A type of training that FLDOE could do. I remember I was able to attend a new Directors Academy. Spending some portion of that time to provide information and training on that would be huge!”

“I wish that I would have had more crisis and trauma training in advance. I think that would have been super helpful.”

“It would have been great to have had some guidance on things like, ‘This is what you need to do when a Category 5 hurricane hits. Have you thought about this yet? Have you done this yet? These are the first things you need to worry about, and these are the next things you are going to need to worry about.’ I know there’s no ideal checklist, but some sort of training in advance would have been helpful.”

“I think the biggest thing I needed training on was understanding where the money is going to come from to help us. That was the most difficult thing.”

This included training on self-care strategies.

“I wish there was more of a focus on self-care prior to the storm. Like getting training on some helpful things we could do to deal with stress. Teaching is a very stressful job on a normal day.”

“One thing to remember about self-care is that if these strategies are used prior to the storm happening, it will be easier to utilize them after the storm. It’s always harder to learn something new after the situation occurs.”

Pre-disaster training for school districts may focus on subjects such as emergency preparedness and response planning, processes and procedures, shelter operations, communications, resource procurement, mental health interventions, and more.

“I think there’s much value in having training ahead of time...I think of it comparable to safety drills. You know, you have the drills with our students because you never know what kind of situation is going to come up, but at least they know, ‘Oh, if this alarm sounds, we need to do this’ or ‘Our teacher says this word, so we need to do this.’ That’s why we do these safety drills. So, I think it would be comparable to that. Just to get everybody ready and on the same page in the event that we had to use it. Hopefully you would never have to, but just to give you some level of understanding and maybe a little bit of preparedness.”

But no matter how much training is offered in advance, the fact is that every school district will need to implement some professional development programming in the wake of a major disaster.

“You have these safety plans that are in a red binder, and they sit on your desk somewhere. And, you reference it every once in awhile and you update it...but these weren’t meant to deal with something like Michael. That’s something completely different. [No one] prepares you for something like that.”

After Michael, BDS found that some professional development workshops were beneficial for almost all staff. This included trainings on understanding trauma, suicide awareness and prevention, identifying signs of mental health challenges in adults and youth, knowing when and how to seek help, and self-care, to name a few.

“We really needed the sensitivity training that Frank Zenere [Crisis Coordinator, Miami-Dade Public Schools] did early on after the storm -- training on ‘these are some of the things that are going to happen and what to expect.’ I still remember a lot of what he said to this day...I think we also need to bring that same training back up the next year. Like, ‘We know that there are many people that still aren’t okay. This is where you are now, and let’s look at it.’ I think that’s important because we are not mental health experts, nor are we disaster experts.”

“We had this fabulous trauma sensitive workshop from Dr. Elizabeth Connors [Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Yale School of Medicine] on understanding how trauma affects kids -- how it impacts their brains and their behaviors. And, we were given these easy-to-use strategies to help a child in crisis. I really think this is something everyone should have.”

“I really liked the Youth Mental Health First Aid training. I found the information very helpful. I think that all educators should go through that training. It doesn’t have to be after a hurricane. It’s great information for the every day.”

Other trainings needed to be more targeted to support specific positions, roles, and needs.

“Everyone needed self-care training. That was universal. But our educators also needed something more targeted to them. Like, what do you do when half your classroom is acting out at the same time? How do you deal with all these high level behaviors we have been seeing and still try to get academics in? They needed help with that.”

“The [school-based] mental health professionals received training in CBITS and Bounce Back. These were great tools to have, and we definitely see some kids succeeding after having gone through those interventions whereas they may not have been as successful using others.”

“We were kind of navigating, trying to find what would be the right fit for what group of target audience. That was definitely hard.”

However, not all trainings were helpful.

“FEMA was pushing this training that they wanted us to participate in. It was a Critical Incident Stress Management training. And we thought, ‘Okay. This sounds helpful.’ This was pretty soon after the hurricane, a few months after. So, they sent this guy who I think was emergency services from Texas to do this training for our educators. Well, it wasn’t a useful training. It had nothing to do with anything we needed. We aren’t first responders. We are educators. This guy had never set foot in a classroom before in his entire life. Why on earth FEMA would even think this would be a helpful training for us is beyond me.”

With limited time and resources, and a distressed audience, BDS learned they had to be very strategic in the professional development workshops they offered.

“Our staff were in such a fragile state. And we almost felt guilty trying to make the staff participate in a training where maybe they felt like it wasn’t what they needed or they could have been spending their time doing something more pertinent to their own recovery. So, it was very difficult trying to figure out what training they needed during that time and to not have our staff resent us for

almost forcing them to attend and making something a priority when it didn't fit their needs at that time."

"There were a lot of discussions about what PDs we make mandatory and which ones will be optional. There were just some trainings that were too important to make optional. And others we were okay with folks choosing to attend. It was about finding a balance. And we had to go through that process for each one."

"People only had so much capacity. They could only take in so much. We couldn't just throw a lot of new information at them and expect them to synthesize it like normal, because times weren't normal."

BDS found that cascading training models were not ideal in the aftermath of the storm.

"Having traumatized people trying to train other traumatized people just did not work. Period. It was better to bring in trainers from outside the community and train directly, because our folks' plates were just too full."

BDS also found that they had to reinforce some trainings over time.

"Our staff were super stressed. They would come into a PD workshop and it was like talking to a wall. They weren't taking in the information. They may have been there physically, but mentally they were somewhere else. They were worried about their homes, their families, insurance, whatever. So what we were training on a lot of times just wasn't sticking initially. We had to reinforce that again and again."

With the help of its consultants, the district developed a professional development plan, prioritizing what trainings were needed and how and when they were going to be implemented. The consultants also helped identify trainers from around the country who could help facilitate the workshops.

"We couldn't just throw darts at a board, hoping something would stick. We needed to have a plan and prioritize what we needed training in the most, and how we would best implement that."

"In several instances we conducted nationwide searches to find the right facilitators who could help us with some of our professional development. We spoke with dozens of experts from around the country. The National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland was instrumental in helping us with this process. They helped connect us with Dr. Elizabeth Connors at Yale University for our Trauma Sensitive Classrooms Project. And Lisa Jaycox and her

team at RAND Corporation were instrumental in helping us connect with our CBITS and Bounce Back trainers.”

As the district learned, identifying needed topics, being strategic in which trainings to offer, and finding the right trainers aren't the only challenges to delivering professional development after a major disaster. There were other barriers as well.

“Due to the extreme damage, we had trouble finding locations to conduct some of the workshops right after the storm. If it was a large audience, we only had a handful of places available. One of those was the [school board meeting room]. And even that was damaged. But at least it was usable.”

“I remember one of the first workshops after the storm we had Frank Zenere [Miami-Dade Schools] and Scott Sevin [7-Dippity] coming up from Miami. But there were no rooms available for them to stay in. Everything was either destroyed or taken up by families or emergency response people. We finally got them a place to stay on the beach side. But that was pretty last minute and only after we got a lot of help in securing the rooms.”

“Trying to coordinate an appropriate time to hold that training was just downright challenging. We couldn't do it before school because we didn't want people traveling in the dark. We couldn't do it during the school day because we had no subs for the classrooms. We couldn't do it after school because people had to get back home and meet insurance adjusters or remove debris or whatever. There just wasn't an optimal time.”

One of the most significant barriers to training educators involved substitute teachers. There was a lack of substitute teachers available after the hurricane to cover classrooms. As a result, many educators were not able to attend trainings during normal school hours.

“We couldn't take our teachers out of their classrooms for training during the day because we had no subs to cover their classrooms. We couldn't find any subs. They were hard to find because people had fled the area because they lost everything.”

“One of the biggest barriers to professional development at our school was the lack of substitute teachers. On any given day we had maybe one or two subs available. And on some days we had none. So, we couldn't pull teachers out of their classrooms.”

Another barrier occurred when FEMA and HHS did not provide any funding to go along with any of the trainings they offered during out-of-school time. This heavily impacted attendance.

“FEMA offered some trainings, but there was no funding attached to it. There was no incentive to get our people to give up their time after school or on a weekend. You gotta have a financial incentive for them to consider that. There weren’t any stipends available. There wasn’t money for subs. So there was nothing attached to these trainings that they wanted us to participate in.”

Right after the hurricane, it was too much to ask district staff to attend trainings on their own time, especially with no incentives.

“We met with a lot of people from FEMA and the Department of Health and Human Services. And they basically were forcing us to take these packaged trainings that they had readily available...There was one really frustrating meeting where they had come in and told us that we needed to get this one training out there. It was a training called Psychological First Aid, I think. And, you know, they wanted our teachers to report on a Saturday to do this training with nothing to supplement them financially...So, the one gentleman sat there at the conference room table and said, ‘It really is their civic duty to volunteer their time to go in and do this training on a Saturday.’ And I mean, I about lost it...How was that even a thought? That meant to me that he is disconnected. He did not understand what our community and what our staff members were going through at the time. Our folks were already going above and beyond for their children, for our students, driving from the west end of the beach or from Dothan, Alabama or other counties, coming in exhausted, living in all kinds of conditions -- campers, tents, in homes that had no roofs – and they were still coming in! And then you want to force them to make it their ‘civic duty’ to volunteer on a Saturday when they’re trying to deal with their insurance or repair their home or get contractors and battle all that. It was frustrating.”

Despite the myriad of challenges, BDS managed to implement successfully a host of professional development workshops that greatly enhanced the district’s capacity to address mental health. The capacity that was built was incredibly useful when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

“In a large way, all that training that we had helped prepare us for the pandemic. I mean, obviously there were some things that happened that we weren’t completely ready for. But I really think, overall, when you compare us to other districts around the country, we may have been one of the most prepared. So there’s a positive that came from the hurricane.”

Building capacity is a long-term commitment. While some efforts have been more successful than others, the district continues to look for innovative ways to enhance capacity in order to solve challenges and improve supports for the students, staff, and families.

“We are not afraid to experiment, to think outside-the-box in order to help our BDS family. One thing a disaster teaches you is that you need to meet the needs of the students where they are at. You can’t force a square peg in a round circle.”

“Things haven’t been perfect and if given the chance I would do some things differently. But without a doubt, I am 100% certain we would not be where we are today if we didn’t take some chances and innovate where we had to.”

Additional Critical Lessons Learned

The following are additional lessons learned by BDS staff, which may be useful to others dealing with a disaster. These lessons are on various topics and do not appear in any particular order of importance.

Wait before making any major changes after a disaster:

“Don't make major changes after a disaster...We changed our curriculum the next year after Michael and that in itself was a disaster. It put a ton of stress on teachers who were already stressed out...It's kind of like what they say after somebody dies or you get a divorce or something else big happens; don't make major changes right away...We needed to get on solid footing first. The teachers, the parents and the students, everybody needed to get stable...Let us do what we gotta do to get these kids caught up and then, whenever they get back on their feet, you can then start to move forward.”

Leadership from a superintendent is vital in times of crisis:

“There's got to be leadership. And leadership has to provide hope. And there has to be some steps, even if they are baby steps that you can take and can share with people that you're taking. And I think that that's going to be an important message to get out to other superintendents. The schools are the heartbeat of any community. And so when you step up and provide certain comfort, vision, leadership -- letting them know it's going to be okay, that's pivotal! And I think that that's something that needs to be taught before storms occur. But, certainly if a storm or some other devastating event occurs, the school superintendent is in a pivotal spot to step forward and lead in a way that's going to ripple to the whole community. And once the school system restarts, that brings hope to the rest of the community.”

Acknowledge and appreciate different experiences:

“Every person's experience and perspective on this one incident is so vastly different that we could never assume that we're all feeling the same way. So, I've learned the importance of acknowledging that everyone's perspective has merit and value and that their reality is reality to them.”

Expect the unexpected:

“No one told us that spring, when the trees were supposed to be leafing out, that they wouldn't. We had gone through the fall and the winter without any leaves.”

The storm had blown them off and then of course you don't expect leaves in the winter. But that spring, when things should have been leafing out, they never did. Our kids plummeted in leaf out, because the vision that they had of how things were going to be didn't materialize. Their expectations weren't met...That was a good illustration of when we are expecting something to happen, and it doesn't go the way we want. It can be hard to cope with."

It is not easy to know when to refocus on academics:

"We found ourselves in a dilemma many times. We have all these folks struggling with mental health, depression, loss of homes, loss of businesses, and loss of family members. So, we have all of these things happening. I mean, people were ill, people were leaving, and then we had loss of instruction. So, one of the many conversations we had was how hard do we push the academics? Is it time? Is it time now to say, 'We have to get back to it. You have to go back to the pacing guide. You need to follow the curriculum.' When do we do that? I mean, that was a real struggle."

Things are not going to go back to 'normal':

"It's that old adage that everyone hears, that time heals all wounds. I think it's just true that people have to be patient and know that their reality today will not be their reality tomorrow. And slowly but surely, little things will come back. But, I also think you have to set aside the notion that on 'this' day or when 'this' happens, we're all going to return to normal, because that's gone. We will never ever be who we were before Hurricane Michael – as individuals, as a community. That's just gone. So, we will have a new normal, and in some aspects that may be better, and in some aspects that may be worse. But, as a community, I think you have to just set aside that concept of getting back to normal, because you'll lose a lot of energy trying to do that, trying to put it back the way it was. I did the same. You have to recognize and honor what it is and what it isn't, and understand that it's not all bad. Bu, things will never go back to the way they were before the storm."

Don't set unreasonable recovery expectations:

"I think one of the lessons is around arbitrary recovery dates. Every disaster is different, and every person's situation is different. Saying that everything will be okay by Thanksgiving or New Years or by the start of the next school year is completely unrealistic. It only sets you up for disappointment when it doesn't happen. Just expect everything is going to take much longer than what you expected. When a contractor says your roof will be fixed in six weeks, expect it

will take three months or more. Things will eventually get better, but you cannot force it. It's out of your control. Most people don't understand the extent of the challenges and where they are all coming from. I mean, what does 'recovered' mean anyway? Things are not going to go back to the way they were regardless. I think it's very subjective."

The honeymoon period right after the storm doesn't last:

"Because of the situation that we were in, people came together...We worked together. We were supportive of each other. We had to be in order to survive after the hurricane...I really think we've lost that [now]. You know, time goes by, life goes by, and I think we've forgotten how to work together and how to be cordial with each other and how to respect thoughts and opinions."

Remember that kids take cues from adults:

"Even until this day, literally last week, my younger son said something. We were going to a new park; this beautiful new park out behind Deer Point Elementary School called Glen Haven Bayou Preserve. And, it has a beautiful nature trail you can walk. And, so we were walking through the park, and my younger son said, 'Mommy, do you see those trees? Hurricane Michael did that.' And I said, 'Yeah buddy, it did.' Because the damage is still there, our landscape is forever changed. So, here's this beautiful park, and you see these tall pine trees just snapped like pencils. I think even though we say kids are so resilient, they're also very aware. And as adults, I think it's important to just be aware of the conversations you are having with the people around you, and how you carry yourself through the experiences, because the kids are listening and they're watching and they're learning."

Local knowledge is essential:

"People that are coming from the outside don't know what they don't know. So, for example, FEMA set up a POD, which stands for Point of Distribution, at a place in the Cove after the storm. And it was underutilized. And they were going to move it because they were like, 'People obviously don't need it.' It had showers and food and all that kind of stuff. And I'm like, 'I know that's not accurate.' So, through smoke signals I was able to connect with a friend of mine who's in the Cove who said, 'We're not using the P.O.D. because the hundred-year-old oaks are down in the road. We can't get out!' So then I went back to FEMA and said, 'You don't know this area, but there are [huge] hundred-year-old trees in the road, and these people are stuck. They can't get out. And FEMA was like, 'Oh, okay.'" So off they went and sure enough, when they cut through the

trees, the people could get out and they started using the Point of Distribution. There's definitely a need for local knowledge."

Write down lessons learned:

"I think it's important, while it's still fresh in your memory, to make sure that you capture what your lessons learned are. Capture what you did. Make sure that you write it down. Because, and we've encountered this, you forget what you did after the storm; what the first things were you had to do and how you did that. We were so busy that it was impossible to take time to write down what we were doing at the time...But there comes a moment when you do have time to reflect and write things down...if not a historical record, at least a snapshot of the actions that you took, so that God forbid, we go through something similar, or this continues to be prolonged, that we remember."

Hope for the Future

Over five years after Hurricane Michael, current and former BDS students and employees, as well the broader Bay County community, are continuing their recovery journeys.

“I heard one of the presenters that came to talk to us after the hurricane, and what he said was so true. He said, ‘You’ll never be normal again, but you will establish a new normal.’ So that’s where we are. We’re trying to figure out where our new normal is.”

Hurricane Michael will have a lasting impact on the landscape and on those who experienced the storm and its aftermath. However, this does not mean that all of the marks are scars.

“Dealing with a disaster takes a toll on who you are, but it also helps define who you are. It can be used as a springboard for growth. It can be used as a springboard for connection. It kind of grounds you in a way. For us, it has provided an anchor to the priorities that really truly matter.”

“I think people spend an awful lot of time and energy in the idea that they could put it all back together just like it was before the storm. And, you can’t. You have to just set that aside and appreciate the opportunities that it does bring. I think disaster brings out the very best in people. It also brings out the very worst in people. But I choose to focus on the best. So I formed some friendships and some relationships with people locally and people across the globe that will be lifelong treasures for me from the storm -- people that I would never have had the opportunity to work alongside and learn from otherwise. That’s a positive thing.”

“We gained connections within our community -- connections with our neighbors. We now have a bigger circle of people to support us. I even have a group of friends that are getting together now and celebrating the anniversary of Hurricane Michael with a feast. They’re having all their neighbors come over; and they’re grilling out like they did during those post-storm nights, when they had all this food that had to be cooked; or it was going to spoil. So, they are using the anniversary as a way of celebrating their community of friends that they made, which I think is very cool.”

In spite of the many difficult challenges the hurricane ushered in, it also brought opportunity.

“Because of the hurricane, we have had an opportunity for a fresh start in a lot of ways -- to build a better community, to bridge some of the divides that have separated us, to enhance our schools, and to provide better services for our

families. We have a choice of dwelling on what was lost or focusing on what can rise from the ashes. I personally like the story of the phoenix.”

“I think that some of the construction and things that we’ve been able to implement have allowed us to rebuild better and stronger. I think that, in the end, we will have a stronger community and a stronger school system as a result of the storm.”

“Since the hurricane, things have gotten better. Our community has gotten better and stronger. Buildings are being rebuilt that needed to be rebuilt... Things are continuously getting refreshed and refurbished. Michael was a bad thing. But good things can happen out of bad circumstances... We have so much to be thankful for.”

“The district definitely made an effort to be more trauma-sensitive and to strike things in a way that’s intended to support and not exacerbate people who are coming from traumatic situations. That has been a good thing, because even before the storm and even before we were willing to acknowledge it, a lot of our kids were coming to school with trauma impacts.”

“Life is going to demand for you to be flexible at times, and you can either fight it or tough it out. And what I found is if you tough it out, you’ll end up succeeding in ways that you never thought you could. I know that my life would be completely different if the storm wouldn’t have happened. And, at least for me personally, there were more opportunities to grow and branch out in a different setting because of it. But, I never would have gone out of my setting if I wasn’t forced to.”

“In times of difficulty, like pandemics or disasters, the person you would think you have the smallest impact on is going to be the person that you made the greatest impact on. In teaching, I know that we see that a whole lot. It’s always the ones who we were pulling our hair out over that remember us forever and always want to come back to see us. But I think, especially in times of disaster, where the normal is no longer the normal, you’re going to see that you make a much bigger impact than you realize.”

As the storm’s winds demolished many structures, they also tore down the stigma on mental health.

“I think it was able to normalize mental health needs much more easily because of everyone going through such a traumatic event. I think it became much easier for people to realize the impact of trauma on students and on adults, and how

that changes a person. I don't know that we would be where we are in the acceptance of the need for mental health support to the level that we are now had we not gone through that. I don't think that it would have been in the forefront like it is now."

"I think it has brought to light the need to support mental health. And I think it caused those who really didn't understand mental health to maybe have a fresher and more open mindset about supporting mental health."

"I believe we've evolved with mental health and wellness. Probably 10 years ago, if you talked about it, it was taboo; and you were looked down upon. Like, there's something wrong with that person. And now, we realize that it is something that you need to do to take care of your health. And I think we've driven that conversation in this community, in this school district. I think we've been part of making sure people do understand that it's okay to get that kind of help. You shouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed about it."

And during those dark nights without power, no one could imagine that Michael would provide a beacon of light to help guide the district through an even deadlier disaster that was soon to unfold.

"I think differently about it now. I don't know that it was part of a plan, but it was interesting that after we survived the hurricane and accomplished what we did, getting resources to our students and staff, we found ourselves in the pandemic. So sometimes I wonder if we hadn't gone through the hurricane, would we have been as prepared to respond to the needs of our students and staff and community members during this global pandemic? I don't want to say that it happened to get us there. But, what I will say is that where I used to feel angry, I now have this sense that I'm glad that we recovered the way that we did because then we were prepared for the global pandemic."

"An unintended good consequence from the hurricane was the RESTART grant and the support that we received to get the mental health folks in the schools. I mean, who would have thought that having these people in the schools as a result of Hurricane Michael was going to support COVID? Like, how many school districts or states have any of that kind of support? And we have it in place! And so, that was a really good thing that came out of Hurricane Michael."

The path ahead will continue to be difficult for many. Yet when Bay County residents look toward the horizon, they no longer see the storm clouds gathering. There are rays of hope reminding them that tomorrow will dawn a better day.

“I think the storm brought us all together. It gave us all a common mission to make Bay County better than it was before. It taught all of us that we have resilience. We were reflecting on this the other day at a board meeting that sometimes we forget that. We forget where we were. And we forget how, during that time, we all came together. So, I think it has given us perspective. It allows us to reflect that when we feel like we can’t go one more day, we look back at what has been accomplished with the hurricane and how we made it through those most difficult times. Yet we still must remember that we’re not completely healed yet and that there’s still people going through it.”

Addendum A:

Mental Health Grants Received By Bay District Schools After Hurricane Michael

The following funders provided mental health grants or donations to Bay District Schools after Hurricane Michael:

St. Joe Community Foundation

Mission: The St. Joe Community Foundation's mission is to enrich the quality of life of the people who live, work, and play in Northwest Florida. Created in 1999, the foundation provides grants to other 501(C)(3) entities for the areas of education, environmental stewardship, building healthier communities, and programs that honor the cultural arts.

Grant: The St. Joe Community Foundation funded two mental health clinicians to work with students in the schools.

United Nations Children's Fund USA (UNICEF USA)

Mission: The United Nations Children's Fund is an agency of the United Nations responsible for providing humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide.

Grant: A UNICEF grant was provided to Mental Health America of Greater Houston for the benefit of training Bay District School personnel in trauma-awareness and self-care for teachers and other staff.

U.S. Department of Education -Project SERV (School Emergency Response to Violence)

Mission: The USDOE Project SERV provides short-term immediate funding for local educational agencies (LEAs) and institutions of higher education (IHEs) that have experienced a violent or traumatic incident to assist in restoring a safe environment conducive to learning.

Grant: Project SERV funded capacity building for mental health services and specialized training for professional school counselors. In addition, Project SERV funded the Trauma Sensitive Classrooms Project in BDS.

U.S. Department of Education -Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations (RESTART)

Mission: The RESTART program awards grants to eligible state educational agencies to assist eligible local educational agencies and non-public schools with expenses related to the restart of elementary schools and secondary schools in areas impacted by specific natural disasters listed in legislation.

Grant: A RESTART grant was provided to FLDOE and then BDS to support mental health programming after Hurricane Michael. The funds were utilized for hiring student mental health staff members (Triads), re-keying schools, buses, additional staff to assist in the recovery process (professional development support, warehouse staff, records clerks), and also hiring incentives.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) -Mental Health Disaster Assistance and Emergency Mental Health

Mission: SAMHSA's mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities. SAMHSA is a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Grant: SAMHSA provided a grant to PanCare for the benefit of BDS to include implementation of a summer mindfulness program and educator training for the classrooms. CBITS and Bounce Back training for school-based mental health providers was also funded through this grant.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) -Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education)

Mission: The purpose of *Project AWARE* is to develop a sustainable infrastructure for school-based mental health programs and services. Note: Project Aware Grants are received through the state LEA, and then granted to the individual district. Individual school districts must work with their state LEA in order to apply for Project AWARE grants.

Grant: Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) received a grant for BDS to assist with building capacity for mental health programs in the schools. The grant was used to fund training in Youth Mental Health First Aid, CBITS and Bounce Back, and to acquire the Merrill Strong Kids curriculum.

Florida Council on Crime and Delinquency (FCCD)

Mission: The mission of the Florida Council on Crime and Delinquency is to foster interagency collaboration of all criminal justice entities, provide relevant training, and encourage community service throughout the state of Florida. As part of a service project during one of the FCCD Conferences, a donation by members was gifted to Bay District Schools.

Grant: The FCCD donated play therapy equipment to be used by Triad members and other school-based mental health clinicians serving children in the schools.

Addendum B: Provided to School Districts Immediately Following Hurricane Ian

After the storm, the priorities are:

1. Prioritizing safety and security
2. Connecting with employees and providing stability
3. Planning to re-open schools

Here are a few suggestions that may help you accomplish those goals.

ASAP – PERSONAL SUPPLIES

It was discovered, after Hurricane Michael, that the thousands of dollars in personal items teachers have in their classrooms ARE NOT covered by insurance or FEMA. Please encourage teachers to get what they can out of their classrooms if there is still time. If those items are stored in their homes, they will be covered by homeowners or renters insurance, but the district was unsuccessful in getting ANY money for teachers from insurance/FEMA for personal items teachers lost. Teachers will need to document their losses in the event that a district insurance is different or in the event FEMA takes a different approach. Neither were helpful for BDS.

DONATIONS

You will likely be inundated with donations. From the outset, adhere to the wise advice we received from Volunteer Florida, which was “accept no used items.”

Identify a usable space, which could be a challenge, and someone to coordinate the receipt and distribution of donations. For BDS, that was the director of communications, a couple of principals, and some volunteers to keep the operation going.

Set up a Venmo account or a GoFundMe through your non-profit foundation so financial donations can be received. You would much rather kindhearted people send money than stuff. The stuff becomes overwhelming quickly.

Our substitute teachers were a great source of labor for this effort and were eager to get back to work.

Questions: Contact Director of Communications, at 850-767-4100.

FOOD

Mercy Chefs and Operation BBQ will be reaching out to look for locations to serve. We housed Mercy Chefs in a damaged school that had a functioning kitchen in one of our hardest-hit areas. Mercy Chefs stayed for two years.

Operation BBQ needs a stadium-like space or large parking lot.

Establish a team to evaluate kitchens for damage (separate from those evaluating the schools) and people to note the hood suppression and voltage capabilities of the kitchens.

FEMA will set up PODS (Points of Distribution) across your communities. The most logical place for those is school parking lots because your residents know where those are. The faith-based community will help too.

PODS are an excellent way to spread information if you lose communication. Identify your high-capacity copiers throughout the district and use those to make flyers to be distributed at the PODS to let people know about services and schools.

Pandemic feeding plans that include “meals on the bus” approaches can also be very helpful post-storm.

Questions: Contact Director of Communications, at 850-767-4100.

HOUSING/TRANSFERS

Many of the workforce will lose housing and won't be able to return to work without it. BDS worked with individual employees who were able to house other employees and patched together a network that housed hundreds temporarily. A Google Form/Spreadsheet is an easy way to collect that information. Additionally, we reached out to the community to find affordable housing and had a weekly “housing” email for those employees who were desperately searching.

The businesses, and residents, are depending upon you to get schools back open ASAP so their employees can come back to work and so families can focus on rebuilding.

Human Resources (HR) can also help. You may have employees who need immediate transfers due to housing issues. A teacher who has had to relocate with family may need a job closer to her new location, while someone else may need her spot because she, too, has moved.

Large groups of students may need to transfer schools for the same reasons. BDS waived all requirements for transfers and allowed students to go where they needed to attend. **Order portables immediately.**

Designate some sites for volunteer housing. Volunteers from across the state will arrive and will need a gym or other similar space to camp in while they are volunteering.

DAY CARE

Day cares will be damaged, and the lack of daycare will make it hard for employees to return to work. If you do not charge for daycare, the district can run an employee daycare without meeting all of the state's rigorous daycare guidelines; and you can submit that to FEMA for reimbursement. We set up employee daycares throughout our community and ran them for the rest of the school year after Hurricane Michael. BDS employees relied on that support.

It's critical that these services are completely FREE; that's the trigger for possible FEMA reimbursement, AND that's the caveat that allows the district to waive the state restrictions on staffing, certification, location, size, etc.

COMMUNICATION

Employees will be desperate for information. BDS gathered many recovery resources and sent out a daily email to all employees telling them where they could find food, get their roofs tarped, find insurance adjusters, etc. Many people told us later that the daily emails were their lifelines. BDS kept the daily emails going from October 11th until Christmas.

If communication networks are down; burner phones and satellite phones are very useful. However, someone will need to keep a master list of those phone numbers. BDS had many burner phones after the storm, but there was no master list. It was challenging to connect.

DOCUMENTATION

You cannot over document. In a perfect world, you'd have a complete set of photos and videos of evidence of all facilities before the storm and the facilities after the storm. A picture or video is the best evidence.

Drones are excellent resources to use to document external damage.

FEMA

You will need FEMA consultants. The process is lengthy, exhausting, and complicated. PLEASE call BDS before hiring a consultant and learn from our mistakes. There are many unscrupulous consultants out there who just want to use you and your disaster to make money.

Email is your best friend when it comes to dealing with FEMA. You will want documentation of everything FEMA tells you to do and everything that is promised.

It is important that the mitigation companies have debris monitors. BDS lost a lot of funding because the companies did not have debris monitors to track the debris that was hauled away.

Use existing professional services contracts for documentation.

Questions: Contact Executive Director for Facilities at 850-767-4100.

MENTAL HEALTH

This is the silent killer, and it can't be stressed enough how important is to continue to reach out to people who may say "I'm okay" while they are quietly suffering.

BDS put together a peer guide regarding our experiences with mental health after the storm and you are welcome to any of those resources. In the attached guide, our director of Student

Wellness suggests starting with pages 21-40, *Challenges Right After the Storm* through Reopening Schools.

Questions: Contact Director of Student Wellness at 850-767-4100.

SCHOOLS AS SHELTERS

Our experience with shelters was not good, which is why we are now the shelter coordinators in our community. BDS has a wealth of experience in shelter management and would be glad to share resources, staffing plans, logistics, and operational ideas as needed.

Document with videos and photos the state of your schools BEFORE the shelters move in so you can seek reimbursement from the county for the inevitable damage. Where possible, avoid using classrooms for shelter space and focus instead on congregate school spaces like cafeterias, gyms, and media centers if the EOC will allow that.

You also will need to designate someone to come in after the shelters are deactivated to take inventory of damages and missing equipment. BDS has a punch list that we are happy to share.

It's also a good idea to designate someone at each shelter to come up with activities for children. After 24 hours without power, device batteries are drained, and the children have nothing to do. Idle hands get into mischief as we know only too well.

FINANCE

If your payroll cycle is the end of the month, we hope you've already transmitted it. We suggest you keep two copies of previous payrolls so you can just duplicate one if necessary. BDS employees never missed a check and were paid for every regular working day, whether they worked or not, while we struggled to reopen.

Questions: Contact CFO at 850-850-767-4100.

FACILITIES

This is a series of bullets relating to the damage of your facilities.

1. Designate a project manager for daily progress updates with mitigation contractors.
2. Document, document, document.
3. Follow up. Mitigation contractors will tell you they provide FEMA-level documentation, but they don't.
4. Complete your own inspections. FEMA will tell you they have enough inspectors, but they don't.
5. Time the initial scoping meeting carefully – 60 days is all the time you have to identify all damages.
6. Be mindful that FEMA does not question "Cat B" expenses to the degree they check "Cat E" or permanent work.

7. Ask for a FEMA CRC contact at your first scoping meeting. The CRC are the decision-makers.
8. Order portables now -- forget Florida code -- order what you can safely house kids in and push EOC to allow after-hours deliveries of the portables. Semi-trucks can drive around the clock. This was huge for us to get as many delivered as quickly as we did.
9. Make sure no contracts with mitigation contractors are assignable. I believe there has been legislation passed stopping this; however, out-of-state contractors will still try it.

Questions: Contact Executive Director for Facilities at 850-767-4100.

GRANTS

There is A LOT of money to help you recover, BUT it is in the form of grants, which can be frustrating. Designate someone to manage this and put that person in contact with our Deputy Superintendent.

Questions: Contact Deputy Superintendent at 850-767-4100.

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