

How Schools Can Help: California Teachers Recall the Wildfires

“It Was Scary”

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I teach a fourth and fifth grade combination in a low-income area south of San Diego. About half my children were evacuated during the California wildfires. The children could see the flames in the distance out their back windows. One student said, “It was scary.”

The school district that I work for had an automated call system. The superintendent’s recorded message went out to families around 7 a.m. on October 22. It was a Monday morning. He told parents that the school district was closed for the week because it was too dangerous to keep children in school with the uncertainty of the wildfires. However, many of our parents do not speak English, so they did not understand the district message. Parents took their children to school. This demonstrated how important it was for district personnel to provide messages for parents not only in English, but also in Spanish. If there is another natural disaster, I believe the district will have bilingual messages sent out to all parents.

Most of my students watched the fires on television. They stayed up all night

just in case they would need to evacuate. These are nine and ten year olds.

There are a great many families in our school who do not have a car. I wondered how they would evacuate. I found out that family friends transported those who did not have any vehicle. Though most families in the northern part of San Diego have more than one car, many families in my classroom have limited financial funds. In fact, one of the students in my class has a grandfather who lives on a farm some distance away. Her parents went to his home to evacuate him. The grandfather stayed with his granddaughter. When they took him home, his house had completely burned to the ground. The fifth grader was not only upset about the grandfather’s home, but she also said, “His horses were burned.” They had perished in the fires. This was a difficult reality for the granddaughter who had ridden and played with his horses.

As a teacher, I realized how important it was to allow the students to talk and write about their experiences and feelings. It was amazing how quiet the room was when the students wrote down their thoughts. They were so engaged. I do not remember a time when it was so quiet in my room. Students wrote and wrote. Some wrote about where they stayed. Some went to high school

evacuation centers, while others stayed with relatives in Mexico. The children wrote about what they took with them when they evacuated, such as their soccer trophies, handheld gameboys, and ipods. The students did not talk about clothes or other necessities. However, students wrote that they were worried about each other and about me.

When we began discussing what happened and about their fears, I realized how important school is for them. I said, “School is a safe place. We have earthquake and fire drills to keep you safe.” The children nodded and I could feel a collective sense of community. They were happy to be “home,” “home together” back in school.

Teaching Social Studies in a Math Class

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As an algebra teacher, it is rare for me to conduct inquiry-based lessons or lead in-depth discussions regarding current events. However, the Southern California wild fires of 2007 provided me that opportunity. I opened each class by welcoming students back to school and allowed them 10–15 minutes to write



Ten-year-old Amanda Sexton and her father, at left, carry their hamster and guinea pigs, after fleeing their Crestline, California, home from an approaching wild-fire. They sought refuge at the Red Cross evacuation center Oct. 24, 2007, in San Bernardino.

(AP Photo/Michael A. Mariant)

about their experiences. We departed from the normal lesson that day to discuss their experiences, allowing them to share anything they might choose to share. We encouraged everyone to speak.

We found that everyone was indirectly affected by smoke, ash, parents staying home from work, not being allowed to go outside of their homes, or helping with baby sitting younger siblings. Many students were directly affected due to evacuations, but none of my students lost homes or property. Several students had relatives who lost homes in cities nearby such as Escondido and Fallbrook. The grandmother of one student lost her home, and that student had difficulty sharing her stories.

Many of my students live on Camp Pendleton or along the canyon ridges of the San Luis Rey River, so students living in those areas were most affected.¹ They saw flames, some evacuated to relatives' homes, and none were shy about expressing the fear they felt. They discussed how during the most serious

threats, they could not sleep, and their siblings cried or were scared. However, in general, their parents remained calm.

A Camp Pendleton student made one of the first 911 calls to report the beginning of one of the largest of four fires that burned on base. A lone passenger in his mom's car, he and his mom witnessed an electric transformer explode, "right in front of our faces." The explosion caused the surrounding brush to burst into flames, and before they knew it, there was a huge fire in their path. My students listened quietly, and then individually raised their hands to him to ask questions. He conducted a short question and answer session. Other students living on base had interesting stories. They complained of being surrounded by fire with smoke so thick they couldn't breathe. In addition, they could see flames from their homes, although most admitted the flames were four to five miles away. No one on base gave them much information about how far or where the fires were spreading, but everything worked out okay.

I was touched at how many students expressed concerns for their parents, their younger siblings and close relatives. One student admitted a better understanding of her over protective mother. She stated that because her 5-year-old, asthmatic brother experienced breathing difficulties due to the smoke and ash-filled air, all she wanted to do was protect him. She said she is usually just "annoyed" with her little brother, but she helped keep him inside by playing games with him, suffering through his complaints about not going outside. As a result of her protective feelings, she was able to better understand her parents' actions, and their reactions toward her.

A student with a poor attitude since the beginning of the year and failing grades, touched me with her honesty. To my surprise, she shared with the entire class that "the fires brought me closer to my family and helped me realize that my mom really loves me. I didn't really 'get' her before." She explained that she was quite scared with the many fires on base, but that her

parents did a great job protecting her and her siblings, and that she was happy to be back at school. When she was at her most frightened state, the difficult student realized she feared losing her family; they were all she had and she didn't want to lose them.

Many students shared how they helped elderly or poor neighbors with their shopping or by cleaning ash from their yards. Others helped relatives evacuate, and several volunteered at Carlsbad or El Camino High School evacuation centers. A student who volunteered at El Camino said it felt good to help, and that she felt really sorry for the evacuees. Another student said two families evacuated to her house, so for five days a total of eleven people occupied her home, including five dogs and a 10-day-old baby. She said the baby either cried or slept, and she realized how truly helpless infants are. Her dad is not a fire fighter, but works for Oceanside's fire department. During the fires, he came home in the middle of the night to sleep a few hours, and return to work before she woke up. She was concerned for his safety, but proud of him.

I normally feel exhausted at the end of every school day. I work long and hard, filling the board with equations, solutions, and notes covering each step of algebraic processes. My students work hard as well, but on that particular day I felt a tired elation. I remember wishing I had been able to tape each of our classroom conversations. Each one was different, yet the same; each discussion demonstrated how children rise to the occasion when allowed. The students were good citizens and contributed to their community. I would have enjoyed replaying those conversations for the students themselves, reminding them of their heightened awareness, ideas, and compassion for others. I would have loved to be able to replay our conversations for their parents, so they, too, might feel proud listening to their students express concern for others. I knew I had reached students whom I had not reached before. I had helped students develop higher order thinking skills as well as ideas, all the

while raising their awareness of community and family.

“We Didn't Know How Close the Fires Were.”

Miriam Atlas

Baker Elementary School

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For our students, the wildfires meant no school for one week and some uncertainty about what was going on around them. The majority of our student population is Hispanic and a large percentage come from families where English is not spoken in the home. Those who had access to information received it in Spanish from the Mexican television and radio stations. Some had no access to the media and only knew that school was cancelled for the week because our school staff called every family.

On the Monday after the fires when we returned to school, we were faced with a range of student reactions, concerns, questions, and appreciations for returning to the normalcy of school. As a teacher of our newest immigrants, I had the opportunity to explain to my students in their native language what had happened over the last week in this new city that they now call home. For many students, they only knew that there were fires and that they were unable to visit relatives in Tijuana; the border had been closed. They didn't know where the fires were, how close or relatively far these locations were to their homes, that they shouldn't have been playing outside because of the smoke and ash in the air, or why they had missed school for one week. Using pictures from the media and maps of our region, I was able to bring some sense of understanding about the situation to the students, and in doing so, bring relief and knowledge to them and their families.

Other teachers at our site had different experiences. Most teachers of our youngest students found that the children had misinterpreted or failed to understand what they had heard on the news or from their families. They thought the fires were closer to their houses than was really the

case. The incessant news images of burning houses and land had provoked them to believe that their houses were going to burn down too. Many teachers spent much of that first day back reassuring students of their safety and the safety of their families and homes.

One third-grade teacher spent the morning reading articles and looking at maps with her students. As they read about the lives lost due to the fires, one student had such a strong emotional reaction that the teacher chose to stop the lesson. This girl had experienced the death of a close relative earlier in her life and reading about other people losing their lives as a result of the wildfires brought back her own personal trauma.

Almost all teachers chose to involve the students in some form of a community project. Many classes wrote letters thanking our local firefighters. Others gathered school supplies for students in neighboring communities who had lost everything in the fires. Many teachers spoke to the students about the volunteer work they had done during the week we had been off.

Living within the region, our students ultimately gained a sense of being part of the larger community of San Diego. In addition, our own school community strengthened as we navigated the aftermath of this local natural disaster together.

Note

1. Camp Pendleton is the major West Coast base of the U.S. Marine Corps, located in the north of San Diego County.

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