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COMMENTARY

Weathering the Storm

After the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, Children's Mental Health Must Be a Top Priority

By William Pfohl & Howard Adelman

Schools have emerged as a clear ray of hope amid the devastation and chaos left by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Images of children engaged in the "normal" life of school provide welcome relief after so many scenes of unimaginable destruction and human suffering. While accusations continue to fly over who failed to respond to the Katrina disaster appropriately, schools all over the country managed to open their doors in a matter of days to thousands of displaced children, seemingly without misstep.

It is difficult to overestimate the role that schools will play in the recovery of children and their families affected by these disasters. Neither should we *underestimate* the magnitude of the task or the resources required to undertake it. The success of these early days reflects the responsive, problem-solving nature of the school environment, but the hard work is yet to come. The academic and logistical issues for Gulf Coast schools that reopen and for schools accepting displaced students are tremendous, with lack of records, resources, and adequate staffing and space chief among them. They will be further complicated by the significant and long-term challenge of supporting the mental-health needs of students.

While the U.S. Department of Education has said it will deal with requests for waivers of federal rules on a case-by-case basis, it seems clear to us that certain provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act should be relaxed. *Intensive academic learning will need to take a back seat to recovery for some students for some time.* How soon children begin to regain their emotional equilibrium will vary, depending on their degree of trauma exposure, pre-existing risks, the integrity of their family support systems, and, in large measure, the adequacy of the mental-health support they receive. As we saw after Sept. 11, 2001, schools that provided immediate and sustained mental-health support were able to contribute significantly to students' well-being as well as academic achievement.

Like children after 9/11, survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are likely to experience feelings of fear, anger, grief, anxiety, loss, and hopelessness. School personnel will be supporting students who may have trouble eating, sleeping, concentrating, or interacting with others, and who may exhibit symptoms such as crying, regression, misbehaving, withdrawal, or aggression. These symptoms can last for months or longer, and many children may be at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Some will be at risk for suicide.

The good news is that schools' unique capacity to facilitate the connection between mental health, learning, and development presents a built-in opportunity to respond to these needs. The learning environment provides a natural context for growth and healing. It is familiar and accessible to students and designed to promote collaboration with families and community services. Moreover, virtually every community has a school, and most children spend a good portion of their active waking hours there, giving staff members the opportunity to observe students' mental-health needs and either provide them help directly or refer them to the appropriate service providers.

The latter will be especially important in schools where the severity and scope of mental-health needs are beyond the capacity of current school mental-health professionals to address without

help. Services need to encompass not just students, but also their families. Data from previous crises suggest that 25 percent or more of affected individuals may be in need of mental-health services. Sheer numbers alone could overwhelm schools' ability to provide such help, making it imperative to coordinate with community service providers. This is particularly true given the fact that many school personnel in the affected areas will be dealing with their own trauma and loss, and will need support themselves.

Schools' rapid response and warm welcome to students in recent weeks represent the first essential steps in starting children on the road to recovery. Supporting this journey over the coming months will require additional finances, personnel, training, flexibility, and patience. For some time, schools will need to continue to: be realistic about the challenges they face, while emphasizing that recovery is possible; keep the needs of the students, collectively and individually, at the center of all efforts; engage (or establish) their crisis teams; equip staff members with information about children's trauma reactions and strategies for helping them; bring in necessary additional support for staff and students; embrace families and communicate with them consistently and openly; balance academics with social and emotional learning and social support; focus on students' strengths and the opportunity presented by the crisis to help them become more resilient and competent problem-solvers; and note lessons learned in this experience, to better prepare for future crises.

School personnel take on the weight of our children's world in a variety of ways every day. Those helping Katrina and Rita survivors are undertaking a Herculean task, and they deserve our support and gratitude. More important, they need our understanding that the return to "education as normal" will be a process, not a pronouncement. With this understanding must come the commitment to provide the resources necessary to make genuine recovery and learning possible.

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