



## AASA New Superintendents E-Journal

September 2008

### Editor's Note

Dear Colleagues,

The *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* is a quarterly publication tailored to the needs of new superintendents. Each edition includes three articles prepared by new and seasoned superintendents, educational leadership professors, consultants and practicing school administrators. This edition of the journal addresses three topics essential to the new superintendent's success in the school district.

Fred Nolan is the superintendent of schools for Foley Independent School District #51 in Foley, Minn. Nolan's second article for the journal, entitled "How To Program the GPS for Your School Board's Annual Budget Road Trip," uses the global positioning system device metaphor to guide the intricacies of the budget process. The author has additional supportive materials available to any reader upon request ([FNolan@foley.k12.mn.us](mailto:FNolan@foley.k12.mn.us)).

The second and third articles deal with emergency response. Tim Creal, superintendent of the Custer School Districts in Custer, S.D., offers his article, "The Things We Don't Sign Up For," to provide newly appointed superintendents with guidance on the lessons learned in the handling of an emergency situation in his district. The final article is authored by Katrina veterans Rodney Lafon, AASA Governing Board member and superintendent of schools of the St. Charles Parish Public School Systems in Luling, La., and his public information director, Rochelle Cancienne-Touchard. Their article, "How Will You Let Them Know? Communicating in a Disaster," looks at the use of technology and effective communications when disaster hits.

Future issues of the *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* will look at such topics as systems thinking, sustaining a district vision and board relations. Authors interested in submitting articles are encouraged to contact the editor. Submissions are invited throughout the year. Access the [author guidelines](#) online.

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# How To Program the GPS for Your School Board's Annual Budget Road Trip



**BY FRED NOLAN**

*Fred Nolan is the superintendent of schools in Foley Independent School District 51 in Foley, Minn. Additional supportive materials are available to any reader upon request at [FNolan@foley.k12.mn.us](mailto:FNolan@foley.k12.mn.us).*

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In this digital age, global positioning systems (GPS) are rapidly replacing paper maps as the tools we use to guide our course toward a final destination. With starting points, waypoints, destinations, beeps and messages, GPS are reinventing the “road trip” and making travel more interesting through activities such as geocaching. [Geocaching](#) is a worldwide game of treasure hunt in which people use GPS systems to find items that others have hidden around the world.

Using the geocaching metaphor, this article will guide newly appointed superintendents through the travails of the budgetary process.

## **Steer the Process with an Annual Fiscal Calendar**

While developing next year's budget is not nearly as fun as geocaching, your district's annual budget is the key tool for keeping your district healthy. Developing and implementing the budget is a year-round task, so outline the steps in a financial calendar that details the dates by which specific tasks will be accomplished and by whom. Our financial calendar is adopted by the school board. An established timeline guides the entire district, including the board, to make timely budgeting decisions.

The board, the administrative team and the public all play a role in budget development. The board role primarily revolves around setting the destinations for the trip: the strategic goals to be accomplished during the fiscal year and the desired fund balance at the end of the fiscal year. The administrative team tasks primarily revolve around gathering data that accurately describes the starting point: providing the board with research results about what makes for effective education, current class size ratios, current academic performance and audited fund balance data. The administrative team also provides the board with information about waypoints (benchmarks) on the way to the final destination.

## **Consider Potential Detours on the Budgetary Road**

Throughout budget development, you must continually pay attention to certain elements that may factor into your trip. It's similar to watching your gas gauge so you don't find yourself stranded someplace.

- Considering the politics and power players in your district and the philosophy and fiscal inclinations of the city and county are important aspects of the budgetary process. Paying close attention to these factors will prevent you from making mistakes obvious to a "local" citizen. It's similar to avoiding the common mistake of novice geocachers who make a "beeline" for the cache, ignoring whatever obstacles may lie ahead. Similarly, novice superintendents may find themselves traveling many miles in the budgeting process only to find themselves on the wrong side of a political sacred cow.
- Making frequent smaller adjustments, whether in budget reductions or levies, goes down easier than making one large adjustment. In my experience, you can reduce budgets or increase levies in the 1.5-2.5 percent range and the system and taxpayers adjust. I have watched neighboring districts try to do nothing for a period of years and then make changes in the 5-7.5 percent range, losing the trust of those within the district and the community.
- Ensuring the superintendent and the CFO or business manager think alike regarding the budget process and important data is essential.
- Complying with statutory deadlines and staff contracts is equally important.
- Understanding that budgetary decisions affect people is vital. People become very emotional when difficult budgetary decisions are made. *Managing Transition*, by William Bridges, is an excellent resource that describes this process and suggests leadership strategies.
- Building awareness of and support for budget reductions or changes in expenditure priorities with your board or community is a step that cannot be overlooked. "You need to lay pipe before you can pump water."
- Remembering that the process is the same, or nearly the same, whether you have fairly stable funding, are facing budget shortfalls or anticipating significant increases is vital. Remember: the wants and needs are always greater than the available resources. You're going to take this trip every year you are superintendent, and the trip matters to the health and success of your district and you.

### **Program the Starting Point**

For you, the budget adventure begins in the fall. You must create the data that identifies the starting point and determine the key data to track throughout the process. My choices for key data are the following:

- Enrollment history by building and by level;
- Pre-school enrollment history to match to elementary enrollment;
- Performance data by building and by level;
- Class size and FTE ratios by building and by level;
- Budget growth and fund balance trends with audit results;

- Recent changes in housing patterns in the district;
- Discussions with the board chair and key administrators about how budget decisions have been made in the past; and
- A current SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

If the district you are entering does not keep this data, getting the data and creating the data systems will not be easy.

When I came to my current district, they did not break down FTEs by building. As it turned out, a very successful high school principal was able to protect his building from budget cuts and his staffing ratio was richer than any other building. The data analysis called him out, but I had to publicly protect him by saying, “Every good principal will work to protect his building.” So pay attention and do this data gathering when no one else is thinking about budgets.

Sharing this current status or starting point information with key internal and external audiences is important to build an understanding of budget decisions that may need to be made later. Having this information summarized in charts and readily available on the Web will be important in the spring, when others are paying attention to the budgeting process and the destinations of this year’s “trip.”

The SWOT analysis is your chance to summarize the district’s starting point. A former board chair wanted me to present a state of the district address to the board in early January. At first I groaned, but then realized what a gift this was. I was able to summarize the performance, enrollment and financial data of the district and publicly provide my perspective on the current SWOT. If no one asks you to make this kind of presentation, talk to your board chair and offer to do it. It works. Your state of the district address verifies setting the starting point for the budget trip GPS.

### **Set the Destination**

Each trip must have a destination. A school district’s destination should be improved learning and opportunities for students and fiscal stability. Whether you have a fully detailed strategic plan, or a mission statement and a set of educational principles, or nothing in writing, I recommend the school board set improvement goals for the system at the beginning of the budget cycle—right after the state of the district address. The school board also should identify how much fund balance they want at the end of the fiscal year for which you are creating a budget.

Annual goals can be repeats from the previous year. For example, Foley Public Schools in Foley, Minn., has had the following goal for six years with slightly different emphases:

To develop exemplary, effective and efficient E-13 curriculums for optimal student learning through Foley Curriculum Review Cycle with particular emphasis on the uses of technology to improve student learning and broaden education opportunities.

I don't think the goal-setting process needs to have a large community input, assuming you had community input within the past decade to create a vision or mission statement. I ask the administrative team to review and add to goals that I draft as a result of the SWOT state of the district report. The board does likewise. The result is that within a month, the district has adopted improvement goals for the fiscal year for which we are to begin to budget. In my timeline, this is done by mid-February. When the school board sets goals that drive the budget, this process could be described as goal-based budgeting.

It's important that the board agree with you about a fund balance target. Some board members want to put too much money away, not realizing what cuts will need to be made to get to that target; some just get fixed on the dollar amount and think it should all be spent on classrooms and kids.

Also, due to legal requirements to not overspend any one budget category, districts often underspend by one percent of the overall budget. For me, that underspending and conservative revenue expectations have consistently resulted in larger-than-anticipated fund balances at the end of the fiscal year.

Some districts and superintendents use a fund balance policy—a practice I don't condone because it doesn't allow flexibility. Sometimes when you are anticipating an unusual revenue, you can build fund balance and sometimes when you are expecting a short term expense, you can reduce fund balance. But if your board wants to overspend or oversave, then a policy becomes helpful.

During board workshops, our director of finance reviews all the reserved and designated fund balances and the requirements for cash flow so all board members understand the fund balance requirements. As a point of reference, I have recommended and had success with a 7 percent unreserved balance and an overall 15 percent balance.

### **Establishing the Waypoints**

You've set the starting point (current data and SWOT), and the destination (improvement goals and fund balance target), so it's time to establish waypoints for your journey:

- Schedule a midyear budget update by the director of finance and operations. This is not an audited budget, but it takes into account updated enrollment numbers and any changes made in the first half of the year.
- Garner school board agreement regarding several assumptions:
  - An overall inflation rate,
  - A salary inflation rate (depending on the state's rules for negotiations),
  - An enrollment projection for the coming year,
  - Class sizes desired for K-2 and 3-12,
  - Reaffirmation of goals and
  - Any specific programs necessary to begin to meet goals.
- Roll over the current budget with the inflation assumptions by the board and no changes in staffing.
- Add what is reasonable to achieve the board-agreed goals to the rolled over budget.

- Calculate the gap between the rolled over budget with goal-based priorities and the expected revenues. Based on that calculation, you have three options:
  - If the gap is non-existent or small, check to see if you can close it by attrition. Then you can report to the board that the budget will match their assumptions and goals with no further action except to approve the final budget in June. (In 13 years, this has happened in my district twice.)
  - If the gap is significant, but you have significant retirements, you can prepare a recommendation to the board that uses attrition to eliminate programs and that will be sufficient to meet goals and assumptions. (In 13 years, this has happened twice.)
  - If the gap is significant, you need to establish budget targets and run a budget reduction process based on building and operations targets, public hearing(s) and final board action.
- Set budget targets according to school buildings and operational departments, including the district office, and bring to the board methods to achieve the goals and desired fund balance. (I've had to do this nine times in 13 years.)
  - Establish an overall high and low target. The high is a greater reduction than necessary to achieve the budget reduction and the low is less than what is required.
  - Divide that total among buildings and operations/administration. This is more of an art than a science and requires you to talk to administrators individually. "If I asked you to cut \$100,000 what would you be likely to do?" Evaluate the answers and, with the class size data, decide which buildings and administrators can take what size cut. In larger districts, divide this by levels, knowing a certain level of cuts will require that one or more buildings be closed. The more you know at this point, the fewer surprises you will have as the process unfolds.
  - Provide the targets to the administrators a week before they become public. Instruct administrators to develop the strategies for achieving the targets and run them past the director of finance to ensure the idea will result in a verifiable reduction. Caution them to keep the ideas to themselves; this is not a time to have their staff sit in a circle and shoot each other with budget reduction ideas.
  - Let the board and public know the targets and lay out the timeline for the announcement of the strategies, the public hearing(s) and final budget action. Try to keep this timeframe to three or four weeks.
  - Ask the administrators to give you their lists a week before you are to make them public. Review the suggestions and make your decision based on what you think will work and will least affect students' education. Then, prepare a detailed report and keep it private until the day of the board meeting. Your list will include recommended budget reductions and recommendations for no budget reductions. The idea is that the board has some choice: members can substitute a non-recommended item for a recommended item, or even take more cuts than you recommend. You must provide a detailed rationale for each recommendation. Just as a sophisticated GPS provides information about the restaurants within your locality, you should provide the detail for your board, staff and community so that they understand the reasons for your recommendations. This is your chance to make your case and influence the political decisions that are about to be made.

Do your job well and 95 percent of your recommendations will be accepted.

## **Making the Final Decisions**

Your GPS is beeping, indicating that you are close to your destination. Now come the board decisions regarding the budget reductions necessary to complete the road trip. The travelers are restless in the back seat, “Are we there yet?” The audience for the board meetings is 10 times that of any other series of meetings, and your board members grow more nervous as the meetings draw near.

Your job is to get the board to the final destination. This is their heavy lifting. Assure them that they are up to the task and that the short-term and long-term health of the district depend on them completing this process with rationality and decorum.

- On the day of the board meeting:
  - E-mail the report to board members.
  - Tell administrators what they need to know and ask them to inform those who are affected.
  - At the board meeting, build up to the recommendation by outlining the process, goals and assumptions, and then reveal the budget reductions.
  - Answer questions of the board and explain the rationale for your recommendations.
- Hang on for the next month. The lobbying will be intense and your board will waiver. Some changes to your recommendations may need to be negotiated after the public hearing. Stay in touch with your board members and ask them to keep you informed about what they are hearing from the community.
- Remember the message sandwich when you are in public: emotional hook, fact and statement everyone needs to agree with. For example: Every parent and teacher wants a small class size for their children and students. Research clearly shows that class sizes of 20 or fewer result in academic gains only in grades K-2. After that, smaller class sizes are pleasant, but don't result in academic gains. Ultimately a school district is like a family. We must live within our means and can't spend dollars we don't have.
- Conduct the public hearings with decorum. Ask the board chair to read a statement describing what kinds of comments can be made. Ask speakers to sign in to speak. When they speak, they should identify themselves by name and address. Have a time limit and time keeper. Listen respectfully to everyone and respond directly to no one.
- At the next board meeting, ask the board to act on your recommendations.
  - With the board chair, identify who will make the motion and second the motion to enact your recommendations.
  - Discuss the package.
  - Have board members list amendments they would like see, and be sure you can calculate the effect.
  - Have the board go through the amendments. Use an Excel spread sheet and an LCD display so everyone can see the main motion as it is amended and the total budget cuts made.
  - Urge the board to defeat any motions to table the action. Tabling the action simply will delay the pain. Ask what additional information they

- need that to make this decision now. If you have done your homework, they should have all necessary information and not use "lack of information" as a reason not to make a decision.
- Remind the board that if they don't like the cuts recommended, they can substitute items that are not recommended, but for which you know the savings.
  - Remind the board that they can change some of their assumptions: accept a lower fund balance, increase revenue assumptions or eliminate a goal. In nine years, I've seen the school board do each of these. Last year, we dropped the goal of moving to block schedule at the high school to meet the other assumptions. Are these changes safe? It depends on the circumstances. Most important, you and the board are making the assumptions together so you don't get blamed if things go wrong.
  - Think on your feet. For example, two board members wanted to cut administrative pay raises. In discussion, I was able to work them down to a number that reflected the raise that I was to receive in a yet-to-be negotiated contract. I then proposed that the board freeze my salary and not that of any other administrator. In geocaching, this is the last 10 meters of the cache: when the GPS is less helpful than your notes and intuition of where the treasure may be.
  - You, as superintendent, are now in sales and need to close the deal with your board so the district and community can begin to adjust, move on and mend.
- With the vote, you have arrived at a destination. It may not be exactly where anyone on the board or you thought you would be, but it is a destination based on achieving goals and on the fiscal health of the district.

### **Reflecting on the Trip**

So are you there yet? No. As in geocaching, you need to go home, back to the starting point. Be sure all the notices are given, timelines for hearings are met and strategies can be accomplished as planned. Sometimes, you'll be surprised along the way. Someone doesn't have a license, someone resigns, someone transfers and there are modifications on the way to the final budget. Your business office needs to get the revised budget into the system and check that the assumptions and actions taken really result in the expenditure level you anticipated.

A financial workshop with the school board in the summer is a good idea. The agenda is to debrief after the latest road trip. What worked from their point of view? What needs to be changed for next year? This is the time for you to provide a multi-year forecast looking into the future so they can see what some of their options are. Do they go to the voters for an increased levy? Will housing pick up and enrollments climb? When should the next bond election be tentatively scheduled? What is the political climate and what can be expected from the state legislature and governor?

Changes are made right up to the first week of school. You get an enrollment bump in one school or grade level and you can recommend adding positions at that time. Principals and teachers don't like that, but they adjust and make new class lists and the

children get smaller class sizes. It's better to adjust that way than to hope for enrollment and then pay teachers' salaries when you don't have the funds.

Now the school year has begun with the budget from the road trip you just completed. You are back to programming the starting point for next year's Annual School District Budgeting Road Trip. If it seems like you are constantly in motion, you are. Welcome to the superintendency.

## **The Things We Don't Sign Up For**

**BY TIM H. CREAL**

*Creal is superintendent of the Custer School District in Custer, S.D.*

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Until recently, I had been fortunate enough in my 17 years as a superintendent in two districts to be confronted by only the usual student, staff, curriculum, board and budget issues. Most of those were resolved by planning and discussion. They certainly did not involve spur-of-the-moment decisions ... until recently.

This school year had been stressful for many of us as we were again making cuts due to declining enrollment and inadequate funding. As we neared the end of another school year, we were piecing the budget together meeting by meeting while holding out hopes that we would be able to design an instructional program that would continue to benefit children. Then ... it happened.

The local sheriff walked into my office shortly after 8 a.m. on a sunny May day. The school day was well underway when he closed my office door and told me that a local business had been vandalized. The following message was written on a wall: "A bomb will go off in the school at noon." My heart skipped a beat!

Custer School District has seven schools spread across our district of approximately 1,200 square miles. Four of the buildings are located in the small town of Custer, one in the even smaller town of Hermosa, and two are one-room schoolhouses in rural areas. We also have an athletic complex that includes our football field, all-weather track and grandstand/locker room facilities, which happened to be the site of the regional track meet that day.

Our district has approximately 900 students and 180 staff members spread across all of the sites. Evacuation of one building is one thing, but evacuating all seven buildings created problems. We knew that since the students were already in school we needed to immediately begin using our crisis plan document.

The Custer Emergency Management office had already started to form the necessary teams, which included school officials; local, state and area law enforcement agencies; the fire department; ambulance services; search and rescue; and other local organizations. We immediately scheduled a meeting of emergency management, law enforcement and school officials to discuss plans and procedures for addressing the bomb threat.

During that meeting, we discussed evacuation and the evacuation sites outlined in our crisis plan. Emergency management officials also shared that some processes were already underway, such as contact with the bomb squad from a nearby military installation, and that the command post was set up. We also determined evacuation times for each of the buildings and discussed all the needs associated with the evacuation, such as transportation to the evacuation sites.

What was interesting about the process was how fast plans changed during the event. Once the bomb squad showed up, their protocol immediately changed our plan. For the bomb squads to do their work, we had empty our buildings more quickly than we had anticipated. This caused confusion. Regardless how much we stayed in touch, the slightest miscommunication caused problems that were amplified by the anxiety of the situation.

After the school buildings in the town of Custer were evacuated, the bomb squads were able to enter and do a thorough search. After they cleared the three school buildings in Custer, we were able to return the students to the buildings — in lockdown — for the remainder of the school day.

On the east side of the district, school was dismissed mid-morning for the remainder of the day. After the bomb squad completed the searches in Custer, they traveled to Hermosa Elementary and searched that building. Custodial and law enforcement personnel searched the two outlying rural schools.

Fortunately, since we operate on a four-day week system, we did not have school the next day, which allowed things to settle down and for us to start fresh on the following Monday.

### **Lessons Learned**

Through this experience, we learned several things that I would like to share:

- **Flexibility:** It is vital to be flexible and able to respond to changing dynamics. Once the bomb squad showed up, we had to completely and quickly revamp our evacuation plans.

- **Command post:** At one point, we found ourselves working with two command posts and communication became much more difficult. Operate from only one site.
- **Communication:** Make sure you have the proper decision-making protocol to ensure communications are clear and concise. When we decided to evacuate sooner than originally planned, we determined the method of alerting staff and students of the evacuation, but school officials and law enforcement sent conflicting messages on how to carry out the alert.
- **Superintendent's role:** The district's emergency management determined the school superintendent would be part of the command team and not the media contact nor the person responsible for responding to patrons. Another individual handled those duties. It was important for me to focus on ensuring the safety of the students and staff and not on responding to media questions.
- **Contact with parents:** During the evacuation, we needed to have a system in place to notify parents of the situation and status of their children — not where the children were, but that they were safe. We also needed to forward our phones to the contact numbers provided by the emergency management.
- **Staff training:** We had not trained our staff well enough, and a couple of them caused us problems during the evacuation. In Custer, one staff member panicked and removed her own children and others from the school without permission. This makes accounting for all of the children difficult. In Hermosa, a staff member overheard a comment about the bomb threat and removed her children and other children and started a panic among the parents — enough so that we dismissed school on that side of the district.
- **Media:** Have the contact person alert the media to inform them of the circumstances and assure them that the emergency management team is on top of the situation and that any further updates will come through that individual. Also alert the media that the goal is to ensure that panic does not escalate throughout the community.
- **Law enforcement personnel:** Ensure that you have enough law enforcement personnel to assist with the evacuation of each building. The evacuation site for our elementary students was within walking distance. However, it was vital that law enforcement accompany them to the evacuation site to ensure that the person making the threat did not have a chance to prey on the students during their commute.
- **Debriefing:** Make sure you debrief as soon as possible to ensure that all issues are discussed and that consideration has been given to changes in the crisis plan.
- **The unforeseen:** We did have problems feeding the students. One school was able to feed the students prior to evacuation, but the other two had to work out food arrangements after students arrived at the evacuation sites. It was a struggle to ensure enough food was available.

### **Be Prepared**

Most of the negative comments we received were from parents who were frustrated about not knowing what was happening. Many have lauded us for how we dealt with the situation and said we did a wonderful job taking care of their children. You can be assured that no matter how well the day went, there will be dissatisfied individuals, so don't expect to please everyone.

Be prepared for an exhausting day. Even after buildings are successfully evacuated, there is the concern that the person who made the threat has more elaborate plans, such as planting the bomb at an evacuation site.

Focusing on the safety of the students and staff is the priority — a goal that means that crisis plans must continually evolve.

## **How Will You Let Them Know? Communicating in a Disaster**

**BY RODNEY LAFON AND ROCHELLE  
CANCIENNE-TOUCHARD**

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The St. Charles Parish Public School System found itself in a unique position to reach out to the community during Hurricane Katrina. Like many surrounding parishes in Louisiana and counties along the Gulf Coast, St. Charles Parish experienced flooding and loss of all power, fuel, sanitation, food and potable water due to Katrina.

Among the many challenges faced, the most important was making stakeholders — parents and employees — aware of the mandatory evacuation underway and subsequently keeping them informed. So....

### **How Did We Do It?**

The school system had recently implemented the Connect-ED mass notification service to communicate with parents, faculty and staff. This service enabled us to record and send personal voice messages to thousands of people, reaching up to six phone numbers each. It is fast, easy to use and reliable. When the evacuation announcement was made, with one press of a button, the school system's message was sent to 31,000 phone numbers with a 98 percent success rate.

While the system is designed for school-to-parent communications — and not to supplant first-response systems such as public safety radios — it quickly became a lifeline to the

community and was put to use to facilitate communication from parish officials, the sheriff's office and the emergency operations center.

One of the key components of the system was that it was a web-based service. Because its infrastructure was not local, it allowed us to continue to utilize the service even without power. The system also allowed us to create a call without access to a computer. Using just a telephone, one could access the system, record a voice message, schedule, send and track who received the messages and when.

This system allowed critical information to be communicated to parents and staff, even though many stakeholders had evacuated to the homes of relatives or friends several states away. Everyone who received the message was asked to share the information with their neighbors — alerting stakeholders about current and changing conditions.

That information turned out to be the only such communication from any governmental agency in the parish. The national and local media principally focused its coverage on the flooding and devastation in the city of New Orleans. Since St. Charles Parish is approximately 25 miles west of New Orleans, residents found it nearly impossible to get reliable information about conditions local to their community by any other means.

### **Can You Hear Me Now?**

As the days passed, many rumors sprang up in the minds of St. Charles residents as they watched network television from homes of relatives and friends away from Louisiana. They heard about extensive looting, rapes and other crimes committed by people who came to the crisis site. Rochelle Cancienne-Touchard, public information director for the school system, worked with communicators from other agencies to provide morning updates via radio and traveled to Baton Rouge every other evening to be interviewed by live newscasts.

“We were able to dispel many of these rumors through our communications,” Cancienne-Touchard said. “We had the sheriff appear on television to calm St. Charles residents, and when schools re-opened the footage of school buses had a reassuring impact. Corporate leaders indicated our communications helped them encourage workers to return, and the school system was seen as a catalyst for normalcy.”

### **Getting Back to Basics, Now What?**

The ability to communicate with stakeholders, aside from Connect-ED, was very tenuous. Finding tools to communicate that were not dependent upon electricity proved to be a challenge. The most successful strategy to communicate with the masses that had returned to the parish was disseminating flyers at two sites used for distributing MREs (meals ready to eat), water and ice. Stakeholders were given daily updates via these flyers on school system updates in addition to parish infrastructure progress. With each passing day more and more of the parish's infrastructure was brought back online. This enabled us establish a “Hurricane Call Center” to address the most frequently asked questions of parents and employees.

As conditions stabled, we were able to use more traditional forms of communication (district website, cable access channel) to inform parents and employees that it was safe to return to their homes, kept them informed about plans to reopen schools, and provided support to students displaced from other areas.

### **Are You Ready?\***

Remember that the key to maintaining safe and secure schools is preparedness and effective communication. Without both of these two key components, even the most dedicated and successful school leaders put schools at risk.

- Does staff know their role during crisis response?
- Are emergency information channels in place? (hotlines, websites, phone and e-mail communication)
- Do relationships exist between emergency responders and school leaders?
- Is there a designated spokesperson and does he or she know how to get information about general areas of concern?
- Are template e-mails, letters and speaking points ready to deliver when a crisis strikes?
- Do you share and keep parents informed of crisis response procedures?

### **What Did We Learn?**

- Connect-ED is a vital communication tool.
- The website server should be located off-site, preferably out of state.
- Verify evacuation plans of local radio and television stations.
- Establish community bulletin boards to provide updated information regarding the status of the school district.

The St. Charles Parish Public School System was able to lend a helpful, informative voice to local residents, despite a heavily damaged communications infrastructure. This service provided an invaluable lifeline to the greater community, extending far beyond the school system it was meant to serve.

*\*Information from National School Public Relations Association and California School Public Relations Association*

## **Contact Us**

[Robert S. McCord](#), Editor

The American Association of School Administrators is the professional organization for nearly 14,000 school superintendents.