



**House Committee on Education and Labor**

**Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education**

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This is Not a Drill: Education-Related Response and Recovery  
in the Wake of Natural Disasters  
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Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen, and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share what the U.S. Department of Education has done and continues to do to help States, Territories, school districts, and schools respond and recover in the aftermath of natural disasters. We will also share what we have learned from recent efforts.

In 2017, natural disasters and, more specifically Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, followed by wildfires in California, had an historic impact. Nearly 47 million people, fifteen percent of the U.S. population, were impacted. These disasters were devastating to individuals, families, and communities across the country, in both affected and secondary areas, as disaster survivors were displaced from their homes.

Hurricanes Irma and Maria brought extraordinary destruction and displacement to families and communities in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including disruption to public and private elementary and secondary schools and postsecondary institutions not seen since Hurricane Katrina.

Like the rest of the Nation, officials at the Department of Education were greatly saddened by this catastrophic loss and destruction, and deeply concerned about the potential impact on students of all ages, their teachers, and educational facilities. We also were convinced we had both the determination and the tools to pitch in and provide the immediate and long-term assistance needed to re-open schools and restore the learning environment in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Texas, California and other areas impact by these disasters. The rapid succession of these disasters required government and private organizations to make significant contributions in time and resources.

Our initial efforts to monitor and assess damage, conduct outreach to affected areas, and estimate recovery costs were led by Robert S. Eitel, a senior Department official who had lived in New Orleans through Hurricane Katrina, and Joe Conaty, a career civil servant and the then-Acting Deputy Secretary who had served at the Department during that catastrophe. They knew firsthand how important it was to let victims know help was on the way. We had a blueprint

drawn from the Katrina experience, including relevant statutory waiver authorities, legislation and programs adopted, and cost estimation models. And we were able to call on the services of key career staff who had helped administer Education's successful hurricane recovery efforts following Katrina.

We quickly assembled an internal emergency response team, consisting of a dedicated team of political and career staff who met roughly three times weekly during October and November of 2017. This team conducted dozens of calls with education officials in affected States, Territories, and communities, and collected information on damage to schools and the movement of students and families following the disasters. This emergency response team continues to meet every other week and its members are in regular contact with officials from areas impacted by disasters of 2017, as well as those areas affected by disasters that occurred in 2018 and 2019. We also created the [Hurricane Help Web Page](#) to provide a wide range of disaster response and recovery resources for schools and school systems, including guidance on flexibility and waivers for grantees and program participants impacted by federally declared disasters.

Importantly, we took action to support the provision of concrete financial assistance for education recovery efforts. We prepared cost estimates, drafted legislative options, worked with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the White House to help prepare an official request to Congress for assistance, and provided extensive technical assistance to Congress to help enact legislation. Department staff also consulted extensively with representatives of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help promote effective coordination of planned education recovery activities. At the headquarters level, Mr. Conaty represented ED at frequent meetings of the Recovery Support Function Leadership Group (RSFLG), hosted by FEMA. The RSFLG helps coordinate the recovery activities of over 25 Federal agencies organized by Recovery Support Function (RSF): Health and Social Services (for which ED is a primary agency), Housing, Natural and Cultural Resources, Economic, Infrastructure Systems, and Community Planning and Capacity Building. At the field level, ED also sent field representatives to work at the Joint Field Office (JFO) in Puerto Rico to help ensure federal interagency coordination on recovery.

In the meantime, Secretary DeVos and then-Acting Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, Jason Botel visited each of the hurricane-impacted areas in the fall of 2017. The Secretary deployed more than a dozen Department staff to go to impacted areas as part of the Department of Homeland Security's Surge Capacity Force across Florida, Puerto Rico, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Secretary DeVos also tapped the Department's existing Project School Emergency Response to Violence – Project SERV – a program that supports immediate assistance to school districts and institutions of higher education in which the learning environment has been disrupted due to a violent or traumatic crisis – to support affected communities. Historically, Project SERV awards are most often under \$500,000, in recognition of both the limited role of the program – getting students and teachers back in school rather than rebuilding damaged facilities—and the limited funding available – just \$5 million a year. However, the Secretary also can make larger awards to States following major disasters. In the fall of 2017, she provided grants of \$2 million each to the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Texas, and California, with the goal of jump-starting high-priority relief efforts prior to Congressional action on comprehensive disaster recovery legislation.

In the summer of 2018, shortly after my confirmation as Assistant Secretary, I visited Puerto Rico. I vividly remember visiting a school in Yabucoa, one of the hardest hit areas of the Commonwealth. Dedicated school officials and parents were committed to educating students. Going to school was and continues to be – after the hurricane – an important routine for the students and their families. I spoke with many parents who routinely volunteer in this particular school and who helped clean and repair this school immediately following the storm. The resiliency of the students, parents, and teachers is remarkable and cannot be emphasized enough. But they continue to face significant challenges.

We are very proud, and I think justifiably so, of these initial efforts by the Department, its leadership, and staff to assist students, families, schools, and postsecondary institutions affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and the California wildfires of 2017. However, we recognize that in many ways these efforts merely helped set the table for effective

implementation of Public Law 115-123, the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (BBA), which provided the Department \$2.7 billion to fund a comprehensive set of disaster recovery programs authorized by the BBA. Under the BBA, the Department has awarded the following grants to date that support State and local recovery efforts for covered 2017 disasters:

- Nearly \$800 million to a total of four States, Puerto Rico (\$589 million) and the U.S. Virgin Islands for Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations, to help local educational agencies and non-public schools defray expenses related to the restart of operations in, the reopening of, and the re-enrollment of students in, elementary and secondary schools;
- \$440 million to 24 States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands for Temporary Emergency Impact Aid for Displaced Students, which assists with the cost of educating K-12 students displaced by the 2017 hurricanes and wildfires;
- \$25 million to 20 States and Puerto Rico for Assistance for Homeless Children and Youth to support school districts serving homeless children and youth displaced by the 2017 hurricanes and wildfires;
- \$98 million for Emergency Assistance to Institutions of Higher Education awards to 68 postsecondary institutions in areas directly affected by the 2017 hurricanes and California wildfires; and
- \$7 million for Defraying Costs of Enrolling Displaced Students in Higher Education grants to help defray the unexpected expenses associated with enrolling displaced students from institutions of higher education directly affected by the 2017 hurricanes and wildfires.

Congress also provided \$35 million for Project SERV activities specifically focused on restoring the learning environment in areas affected by the 2017 disasters, along with authority to reimburse the regular Project SERV program for the grants made in the fall of 2017 (helping to maintain the reserve of funds that the Secretary uses to respond to violent or traumatic incidents such as the mass school shootings in 2018).

Similar to our work prior to enactment of the Bipartisan Budget Act, I think the Department performed well in administering these education recovery programs and awarding funds fairly and expeditiously. We provided multiple and often extended opportunities to eligible applicants

to submit and revise application data; offered comprehensive technical assistance, including dozens of individualized, State-specific calls; and maintained program-specific email inboxes to facilitate timely responses to questions from States, Territories, and local education officials on key issues such as allowable uses of funds. We believe these efforts, in general, have been well-received and appreciated by our State, Territory, and local partners.

At the same time, we recognize that, in far too many communities, recovery from the full effects of the 2017 disasters has been painfully slow and incomplete. That recognition makes this hearing a timely one, particularly as Congress considers new legislation responding to the 2018 disasters, including Hurricanes Michael and Florence, Typhoon Yutu, and the California wildfires, as well as the severe flooding in the Midwest earlier this year.

The Department's response to these new disasters thus far has largely followed the same script as for the 2017 disasters. We have reached out to affected States and communities, provided technical assistance, and used Project SERV to provide immediate assistance. Recent Project SERV awards include \$1.1 million to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands after Typhoon Yutu, \$2 million to the State of North Carolina and \$1.2 million to Bay County, Florida in 2018 for Hurricane Florence, and \$2 million to the State of California for the 2018 wildfires. This year, already tornadoes and flooding in Jefferson, Missouri may require our assistance to help restore the learning environment.

As a result of post-Hurricane Maria coordination discussions at the RSFLG with FEMA, ED is leading a new "School Communities Working Group" on "Planning for Effectively Supporting Schools and School Districts in Recovery" based on the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF). This Working Group will help other federal agencies better understand the needs of schools and how to interact with them; identify challenges, lessons learned, and successes; and submit recommendations to inform policy and RSF Operations.

We are taking concrete steps to improve our disaster response capabilities based on lessons learned over the past two years. Two key lessons are sobering, but important for managing

expectations as the number and severity of natural disasters appears to be increasing: full recovery from major disasters is extremely challenging work, and the Federal role depends heavily on State and local partners.

Natural disasters create extraordinary stresses on local governments and institutions, often taxing capacity nearly to the breaking point. Basic needs must be met first, followed by rebuilding activities that cover short-, medium-, and long-term time periods. Transitions in leadership and staffing, competing priorities for reconstruction, and even access to the basic manpower and materials required for rebuilding often slow the recovery process, at times seeming to bring it almost to a halt.

But this doesn't mean we can't do better in helping States, Territories, and communities overcome these challenges and restore the learning environment to the greatest extent possible, as soon as possible. Returning students to school, and teachers to the classroom, is essential not only for keeping students on track in their education, but also to restoring the daily rhythms of family, neighborhood, workplace, and community.

When Congress provides supplemental education-related disaster recovery funding to affected areas, it is vital that the Department respond by implementing the new authority and funding quickly and effectively. The provision of timely allocation of resources, high-quality support, and appropriate oversight of Federal funds is key to the recovery effort. We have learned that managing and coordinating all the Department's efforts takes dedicated staff and resources. In response, we have created a new Disaster Recovery Unit (DRU) housed within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The new team has a director and three staff devoted full-time to managing the Department's disaster response efforts. A fourth staff member will be added in the near future. The DRU supports the development of permanent, in-house expertise to effectively and efficiently leverage other resources both within the Department and in partnership with other Federal agencies and technical assistance providers.

In addition, the DRU will help the Department partner more effectively with Congress to determine how to best support your communities in recovering as quickly as possible from

natural disasters, including the full restoration of the learning environment at all levels of our education system.

Thank you again for providing an opportunity for me to discuss this important issue. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.