



Statement for House Committee on Education

By Steven D. Herrington, Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools

Chairperson Sablan and the members of the committee, good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak today.

As the County Superintendent of Schools in Sonoma County, California, it is an honor to share with you lessons learned from responding to the Tubbs Fire that devastated my community in 2017, as well as my experience helping other educational leaders with similar disasters, such as the catastrophic Camp Fire in Butte County as well as fires in Shasta and Ventura counties. I commend you for convening this hearing so that educators and emergency response agencies can be better prepared to support schools and children when the next disaster strikes.

In Sonoma County, north of San Francisco, my office is privileged to serve 40 school districts that provide care and education to more than 70,000 public school students. Some districts are small and rural, serving as few as ten students, while others are large and urban. Wine country is associated with wealth, but more than 45 percent of our students are socio-economically disadvantaged.

In October 2017, our community experienced the Tubbs Fire. At the time, it was the most destructive wildfire in California history. In my 46 years as an educator (and 36 as a superintendent), I have responded to numerous floods and earthquakes. But I have never seen a natural disaster take such a toll on an educational community as did the Tubbs fire. This wildfire swept from the dry hills and into the city of Santa Rosa overnight, leaping over a six-lane freeway and overwhelming our emergency services. It destroyed numerous school sites and the homes of nearly 1,500 students and 250 school employees in Sonoma County. Our most impacted school districts were closed for three weeks as they dealt with the aftermath. Two schools could not re-open for



months as toxic debris was cleared from the neighborhoods. Wildfires in Northern California that fall resulted in \$8 billion in damages and more than forty deaths. Since then, as you know, similar wildfires have burned into other California communities, causing even more devastation.

I commend educational leaders around California for responding quickly and with innovation to these disasters. These fast-moving, devastating wildfires have brought unprecedented challenges and offered many lessons. Today, I'd like to share with you the lessons I and my colleagues have learned from these disasters and how, I believe, the federal government can best help schools reopen their doors after a large-scale crisis.

1. **Reopening Schools:** Schools play a critical role in restoring normalcy to children's lives and addressing trauma, and it is imperative that local, state, and federal governmental organizations work together to ensure that students can return to class as quickly and safely as possible after a disaster. There are protocols for ensuring safety and reopening school sites after earthquakes, but prior to the October 2017 Tubbs fire, none were in place for opening school sites impacted by toxic ash, debris, and smoke. A special state task force convened by the California Department of Education and Office of Emergency Services was very helpful in assisting districts to find solutions. However, I believe that a state or federal standard is needed that can guide a school district superintendent through the process of determining whether it is safe to reopen school after a wildfire. Also, guidance is needed for districts and counties from the Environmental Protection Agency regarding how toxic ash should be dealt with.
2. **School Facilities:** When a school is in a fire's path, the biggest obstacle to reopening is finding a physical location to hold classes. Following the Tubbs Fire, public schools that burned were fortunate to find alternate facilities within their school districts, but the same was not true in the Camp Fire in Butte County. It



took weeks to find facilities, such as converted warehouses. If the federal government could provide portable structures that meet required standards to serve as temporary school facilities, it would greatly increase the speed with which school could return to session.

3. **Grants:** School districts were very grateful for financial assistance provided through grants such as Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations (RESTART) and School Emergency Response to Violence (Project SERV). However, timing presents a significant challenge in funding emergency response and recovery activities. Schools and districts must work concurrently with their insurance provider, FEMA, and state and federal government partners to determine how and when expenses will be reimbursed—without clearly defined limits and few assurances. This can result in a lack of certainty and underused funds. In Sonoma County, insurance companies paid schools more than \$7.1 million to cover losses/damages. To date, only one school district in Sonoma County has received any funding from Project SERV/RESTART as of today. That district, Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified, received \$12,219. The CDE estimates that between the Emergency Impact Aid grant, Restart, and Project SERV, Sonoma County schools have received about \$2 million in recovery grant funds. The majority of grant funding came from the Emergency Impact Aid (EIA) program.

Flexibility for states to repurpose unused funds (within the limits of the grant criteria and under consultation with the Education Department) would expedite the flow of reimbursements to impacted communities. Additionally, federal disaster grants could be utilized more effectively if they provided greater flexibility on the use of funds over time. For instance, under the RESTART grant, “initiating and maintaining education and support services” is an eligible expense. It is also a long-term undertaking following a major disaster. Extending the grant period by 1-2 years would provide sustained support to address unmet needs as schools adapt to their “new normal.” Programs should give school leaders the time they need to assess the full breadth of impacts with confidence that funding



will be available to meet students' needs. The California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) has requested that Congress allow for extended time to use federal grant funds allocated for the 2017 fires as well as grant the ability to use these funds for 2018 fires. Their request is included at the end of my testimony.

4. **Reimbursement:** Some of our schools found that they were not able to be reimbursed for expenses that quickly accumulated after opening to the community as emergency shelters because the proper chain of command could not be identified after the fact, even though the request had come from the Office of Emergency Services. Most school leaders are not emergency professionals. In the middle of a chaotic situation, those responding, filling out forms, and completing processes will not always be able to follow every protocol 100 percent correctly. However, schools provided a valuable and needed service to the community and deserve to be reimbursed. We ask that there be additional understanding and flexibility built into the FEMA reimbursement process that accounts for these factors and allow for small variances from standards. For instance, an exception form could be provided to allow schools to make the case for funding in the event that needed documentation was lost. Additionally, we ask that FEMA consider providing or reimbursing school districts for the use of experts and/or consultants to help navigate the federal recovery process. Emergency disaster experts and consultants can be a much-needed resource for administrators while they tend to their regular responsibilities in addition to addressing heightened student needs, often for months or years.
5. **Preparation:** Unfortunately, the likelihood of similar disasters impacting other educational communities in the months and years ahead is very high. A report commissioned by the state of California recently predicted that, if emissions trends that lead to climate change continue at their current pace, the average burn area in California will increase 77 percent by the end of the century. My office is working with CCSESA to develop a toolkit for county offices that can be



used in future wildfire disasters. I encourage the federal government to consider developing a similar toolkit that can help schools prepare for and respond to wildfires. Additionally, FEMA could increase its outreach to schools to inform them of the ways that they can prepare for a disaster. My office has applied for a grant to create a hazard mitigation plan for all the schools in Sonoma County. Generally, schools are omitted from county and city hazard mitigation plans. We recently learned that schools are eligible for dedicated FEMA recovery funds if they have a hazard mitigation plan in place when disaster strikes. This kind of information is important to share widely. Additionally, it would be helpful for FEMA and the Education Department to coordinate more closely on disaster response and school safety.

- 6. Support Testing Waivers for Impacted Communities:** Following the October 2017 wildfires, the largest school district in Sonoma County requested a waiver for spring standardized testing. The district's schools had been closed for three weeks during the disaster and students were still behind in their curriculum. Additionally, the district did not wish to further stress its traumatized students and staff with the anxiety of testing. When fewer than 95 percent of students are tested, ESSA requires that states are asked to reflect low participation in the school district's ratings. The federal department of education did not grant the district's request for a testing waiver. As a result, the district was given all orange scores on the state's accountability metric (the second to lowest performance category). This provided false and unhelpful data that will skew the district's accountability ratings for two full years based on the way school success is measured in California. As well, it makes it more difficult for the district to use the test scores for their intended purpose—identifying which student groups are struggling so that they can be provided targeted assistance. This problem isn't unique to Sonoma County. Schools in Paradise, California, where the Camp Fire struck last fall, were also unable to test. The same has been true following other natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. A large-scale disaster has serious and long-lasting impacts on the academic and emotional well-being of a school



community, and school testing policies need to be sensitive to that. We propose that the federal government give states local control in deciding when testing waivers are appropriate following a disaster.

- 7. Mental Health Support:** The mental health effects of a traumatic event such as a fire are far-reaching and long-lasting. Sonoma County schools are still dealing with students and staff who have been traumatized. These impacts hamper a student's ability to learn and an educator's ability to teach. In a recent survey we conducted, Sonoma County school districts reported that more than 2,900 of the county's 70,000 students were still exhibiting increased anxiety, stress, depression, behavioral problems, or decreased academic performance as a result of the 2017 wildfire. The same was true for more than 400 school employees. A superintendent with one large school district wrote, "There is a significant increase in fear, anxiety, and the near inability to navigate through changes and 'unknown' situations. Kids are exhibiting far more 'giving up' than ever seen prior to 2017." Most concerning, he added that there had been a significant increase in suicidal threats or attempts. Another school superintendent expressed a common concern that long-term emotional stress will continue to show up and be exacerbated by other significant fires within or outside the county. This was clearly seen last year when heavy, toxic smoke from the Camp Fire descended on our community. Teachers reported kindergarten children crying and running inside after seeing the smoke while on the playground. Staff and parents were equally stressed. My organization was fortunate to benefit from private grants that allowed us to contract with experts and provide training and resources to local schools and families. Not every impacted community has been this lucky. Now that our grant funds are expiring, I am hopeful that we may have access to federal RESTART grants to pay for counselors to provide additional support for the coming school year. This opportunity is being coordinated through the California Department of Education. I encourage you to consider creating a dedicated source of funding for this. Schools would welcome any financial assistance that the federal government could provide in order to fund sustained



counseling and mental health support for a minimum of three years. Addressing student and teacher trauma will enable our communities to heal and our students to thrive and develop resilience in the face of adversity.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.