

**Congressional Testimony by Glenn Muña**  
**Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education**  
**Committee on Education and Labor**  
**June 5, 2019**

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share our experience in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as we work together to recover after the devastation of a super typhoon seven months ago.

Super Typhoon Yutu hit the CNMI on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, with sustained winds in excess of 200 miles per hour. The 20 mile-wide eye of Yutu passed over both the islands of Tinian and Saipan. It used to be that we were visited by a super typhoon once every twenty years. We have been hit by two in the last three years. Climate change is happening and it matters. The federal government should act to slow and reverse our human impact on our environment. If we don't, we risk first losing beautiful islands like ours. The frequency of super typhoons and their increased size and sustained wind forces require a change in how we build our schools, how we build our homes, our airports and our seaports. They must be built sustainably, and in an economically responsible manner so that we do not have to continue to start anew each time a new disaster occurs.

Out of twenty public schools in the CNMI, over half were damaged by the typhoon. We have five schools that require major classroom repair: rewiring, re-roofing, replacement doors and windows, air conditioner repair and replacement, loss of computers, textbooks, student chairs, and tables. Our largest Middle School, Hopwood, is conducting classes in 42 tents because it was completely destroyed. It will require rebuilding. We must rebuild it to safely and properly house 918 students. The tents, which resemble a military camp, are a temporary solution but could be totally blown away by the next typhoon. What we need are reinforced concrete schools that can withstand sustained super typhoon winds that exceed 200 miles per hour. The estimated cost to build a new Hopwood is \$40 million. Another school, Da'Ok Academy, is housed temporarily in a tin building while we await reconstruction or relocation of those students.

Seven months after the storm, we still have five schools operating on double sessions (WSR Elementary, Oleai Elementary, San Vicente Elementary, FMS Middle School, and Koblerville Elementary). Double sessions mean students attend school for half the day so that another set of students may use the same building for the other half of the day. This is especially difficult for working families who need to figure out who will watch the children for the other half of the day? Double sessions also mean double driving for our school bus drivers, which results in more school bus down time for repairs and students arriving late to school and late to return to their homes.

The CNMI Public School System spent \$1.8 million on clearing debris from our eighteen schools and eight Head Start centers on Tinian and Saipan, and in caring for families using our schools as typhoon shelters before, during, and for three weeks after the typhoon. We estimate on receiving about \$24 million from FEMA to restore the broken classroom buildings at Hopwood Middle School to their previous condition - which means tin roofed buildings. Let's remember that we lost the tin roofs of most of our school buildings during Super Typhoon Yutu. Tin-roofed buildings are not sustainable in super typhoon conditions. To date we have received a reimbursement from FEMA of just over \$750,000 and are still owed \$1,000,000. In addition, we have over \$60 million in repairs to be made to our schools, but are still waiting for final approval of project worksheets from FEMA. We have our estimate. We need FEMA to respond. These repairs cannot be made until FEMA approves the project worksheets.

Tourism is our Commonwealth's main industry with over 550,000 visitors each year. Our airports were closed to commercial traffic for over a month after the typhoon and tourist arrivals are off by 40% since the beginning of this calendar year according to Marianas Visitors Authority which tracks arrivals each month and hotel room occupancy and room rates. This drop in tourism has a big impact on the amount of funds currently available to support public education in the CNMI this fiscal year and next fiscal year. As a result of decreased local revenues, we are taking a 15% budget cut this year and the same for next fiscal year. This is on top of the fact that we still do not have the federal funds to make necessary school infrastructure repairs. We urgently need disaster relief funds from FEMA and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG-DR) funds so that we can make school repairs in the summer when school is out of session beginning this June through August with school reopening on September 3, 2019.

We need a faster response from our federal partners - FEMA and CDBG-DR. We were able to secure a Project SERV grant of \$1.1 million within a month of the storm from the United States Department of Education. The Project SERV grant pays for grief counselors for our students and teachers who have suffered losses as a result of Super Typhoon Yutu, overtime for our bus drivers working double sessions, substitute teachers to replace teachers who left after the devastation of Yutu, and rental space for one school, Da'Ok Academy. Project SERV has been a big and timely help. Yet seven months have come and gone and we are still waiting for FEMA cost estimates and approved project worksheets for school repairs. Also, CDBG-DR doesn't even have a time table for when we can expect support. While we have students attending class in tents, or in schools on half day sessions, all while dealing with trauma, this slow response is unacceptable. The critical importance of a prompt response cannot be understated. It can be done.

We recommend the federal government provide greater flexibility to make temporary repairs like fixing roofs so that it doesn't rain into classrooms that have lost their roofs. The current FEMA rule is if we make temporary repairs to fix a broken roof, then we lose out on reimbursement funds for hazard mitigation, which are upgrade funds to harden our schools and thus make our schools more typhoon-resistant.

The federal assistance we have received to help us recover from this natural disaster is much appreciated. What we would like to see from some federal agencies is a more timely response.

Thank you.