




BRIEF

# Lessons in resilience:

A playbook for recovery from natural disasters

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January 2026



## Introduction

In the last 20 years, numerous natural disasters have forced schools to close for [extended periods](#), which can cause a lasting impact on students' [achievement](#) and [school operations](#). After a disaster, school leaders and teachers must confront multiple challenges simultaneously, including ensuring student and staff safety, providing immediate support for impacted families, and maintaining educational continuity. Beyond educational responsibilities, school buildings often serve as a [hub for disaster recovery](#) for families, providing a return to normalcy for students, as well as potentially housing resources and mental health support.

However, many [schools](#) and [educators](#) report that they are not sufficiently trained or resourced to serve students' many different needs right after a disaster hits. This lack of resources and training is alarming given the prevalence of severe weather events impacting schools. Over [half of teachers](#) report that the school where they worked had been impacted by a severe weather event (such as a major flood, hurricane, tornado, fire, or heatwave). More and more, severe weather events are becoming a question of when, not if.

As these events become more frequent, it's critical to learn from past experiences to better prepare schools for what's to come. In this brief, we synthesize insights from surveys and interviews with educators and school leaders conducted after four major disasters ([Hurricane Katrina](#) in Louisiana, [Hurricane Harvey](#) in Texas, the [Marshall Fire](#) in Colorado, the [Camp Fire](#) in California). Our goal is to illustrate key lessons learned in the immediate aftermath of the disasters and the on-going recovery process. Our recommendations follow the three stages of recovery: preparation before a disaster happens, responding in the weeks immediately after a disaster, and longer-term recovery strategies that balance academic recovery with additional supports for students' mental health. Based on these lessons learned, we distill recommendations for schools facing similar challenges in future disasters.

# Before disaster strikes: The importance of preparation

## Lesson 1. Get a plan in place ahead of time

Preparation came up repeatedly in interviews with district leaders. Schools that fared best after disasters had already invested time in identifying risks, clarifying responsibilities, and rehearsing their response. Key steps include:

- **Assess community risk.** Evaluate the most likely climate hazards facing schools and surrounding areas (see this [table](#), based on [FEMA's Risk Index](#)).
- **Develop a comprehensive [Emergency Operations Plan \(EOP\)](#).** Outline the actions school members will take before, during, and after an emergency, and assign clear roles and responsibilities.
- **Establish communication systems.** Build a system for [communication and coordination](#) during a disaster, including how the district will coordinate internally and share information with families and community partners.
- **Practice the plan.** When possible, run [emergency exercises](#) and [drills](#) to test the plan and refine logistics before disaster strikes.

## Lesson 2. Build relationships with community organizations so schools can serve as a resource hub during disaster recovery if needed

After a disaster, schools are regularly tasked with serving a variety of students' needs that go beyond academics. Building relationships with community organizations before a disaster happens can help districts respond quickly to the variety of needs without being overburdened.

**Schools serve as community hubs.** After a disaster, schools are called on to meet a wide range of needs—housing assistance, trauma counseling, disaster relief donations. Because schools sit at the heart of their communities, schools are [ideally situated](#) to connect students to community resources. Building relationships with community organizations before a disaster happens can help districts respond quickly to the variety of needs without being [overburdened](#).

**Create a dedicated trauma response team.** Multiple districts emphasized the value of building a dedicated [trauma response team](#) that mobilizes communication efforts and mental health support following a disaster. Partnerships with local mental health organizations and community leaders allow for quicker coordination of resources in the event of a disaster. Offering mental health services directly in schools helps reduce barriers for students and families.

**Plan for housing instability.** Housing needs often surge after disasters. Under the [McKinney-Vento Act](#), students experiencing homelessness can enroll in and attend school no matter where they are currently residing. Districts can prepare by developing [community collaborations](#) and [developing district policies](#) to be able to respond to a surge in student homelessness after a disaster.

### Case Study 1: [Marshall Fire](#)

After the Marshall Fire in 2021, Boulder Valley School District's trauma response team, which included school counselors, psychologists, nurses, and community liaisons, quickly mobilized to establish counseling centers in affected schools. Quick coordination with community partners, such as local shelters and mental health partners, was made possible through strong relationships built before the disaster occurred. School leaders underscored the importance of recruiting and training committed staff to have an effective trauma response team. Additionally, defining clear communication plans with templates for rapid response helped the team move quickly when needed.

## Immediately after the disaster: Focus on first-order needs

### Lesson 3. Try to get kids back in a routine as quickly as possible, continue daily rituals

Predictability and stability are critical for children's recovery after a natural disaster. When routines are disrupted, students may feel unsafe or disoriented, compounding the stress of losing homes, schools, or community spaces. Creating [some kind of normalcy](#) as soon as possible is extremely important.

**Reintroduce school norms.** In wildfire-impacted communities like those recovering from the Marshall Fire and Camp Fire, reintroducing school norms (morning meetings, familiar expectations) helped children reanchor in their day. According to practitioners, even small daily rituals—such as greeting each child, using visual schedules, or maintaining consistent classroom rules—[help give students a sense of control amid chaos](#).

**Invite (but do not require) students to [share thoughts and feelings](#).** Invite students to share—without pressure, using prompts such as “I’m here to listen whenever you’re ready”—can further support their emotional recovery. Even in temporary or damaged settings, returning to consistent structure doesn’t erase trauma, but it offers an anchor that supports resilience, emotional regulation, and incremental academic recovery.

### Case study 2: [Hurricane Harvey](#)

Hurricane Harvey hit Texas in 2017, causing major flooding and damage. In some areas, schools remained closed for up to three weeks. School leaders reported that both students and staff had higher levels of stress and exhaustion in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Teachers reported the loss of instructional time caused stress throughout the year, as teachers felt a pressure to “teach everything” in a shorter time frame. Nonetheless, teachers emphasized the importance of providing students with opportunities to address the collective and personal trauma, even if it further reduced instructional time. This was viewed as a necessary part of the process of returning to normal, rather than something that could be skipped over to jump back into instruction.

## Lesson 4. Academic recovery comes after first-order needs have been identified and met

While it is tempting to jump back into focusing on regular academic instruction, schools typically cannot simply “[return to normal](#)” after a disaster. It is necessary to focus first on students’ and teachers’ emotional recovery and unmet needs. Key recommendations include:

- **Focus first on [emotional recovery](#).** Academic recovery generally could not take place until students and staff had begun their [emotional recovery](#). Teachers often find that students return to school [anxious](#), [distracted](#), or [emotionally withdrawn](#), making it harder to focus on lessons. Some students may [act out](#) or shut down entirely, requiring more one-on-one attention and emotional support. Teachers will likely need [additional resources](#) and [training](#) to support students’ emotional recovery process.
- **Pay attention to teachers’ unmet needs.** Teachers typically live in the same or nearby communities as the school they work in. When a disaster occurs, teachers are often coping with personal and professional disruptions at the same time they are working to address student needs. This combination of challenges can lead to [staff burnout](#) if additional supports are not provided. Many teachers may need their own [mental health supports](#) and [additional flexibility](#) in their schedules to deal with personal impacts on their own families and homes.

## Long-term recovery: Balancing a range of supports

### Lesson 5. Multi-tiered supports are needed for long-term recovery

The level of support needed by individual students and educators after a disaster can be quite uneven, depending on both underlying vulnerabilities and degree of impact of the disaster. To address this varied need, many districts use a [multi-tiered system of supports](#) (MTSS) framework to deliver the right level of help to meet individual needs.

**Why MTSS matters:** Recovery is not a one-size-fits-all process. Some students may need brief, universal supports to regain footing, while others require intensive, individualized interventions. MTSS creates structure and consistency so no student falls through the cracks. Within the [MTSS system](#), trauma-sensitive strategies are adopted schoolwide alongside [universal screening](#) for post-disaster mental health challenges. There are a number of [mental health screening tools](#) that are appropriate for school-based use.

**Tier 1: Universal supports.** Provide trauma-sensitive practices and a foundation of safety for everyone:

- Build safe, supportive environments and routines.
- Train all staff in trauma awareness and stress responses.
- Embed social-emotional learning across instruction.
- Screen routinely for students who may need extra help.

**Tier 2: Targeted supports.** Offer small-group interventions for students showing signs of elevated stress or symptoms:

- Provide small-group counseling or skills-based groups focused on emotion regulation and coping.
- Run check-in/check-out protocols to monitor emotional well-being.

**Tier 3: Intensive supports.** Deliver individualized and specialized services for the students with the most significant needs:

- Connect students with school-based therapists.
- Offer trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy when appropriate.
- Coordinate ongoing care with community mental health providers.

## Lesson 6: Provide extra supports to meet students' academic needs

The combination of missed instructional time and ongoing disruptions from a disaster can have sizable impacts on students' learning. Missed school days due to severe weather can translate to academic losses that are [two to four times greater](#) than the missed instructional time itself (likely due to the compounding effects of disruptions to both school and family life). To address students' academic needs, district leaders recommend:

- **Offer academic recovery strategies like tutoring.** Many students will likely need tutoring and additional instructional time to help catch up from missed school days. Many [academic recovery strategies](#) that were implemented following the COVID-19 pandemic can also be put in place in the disaster recovery period.
- **Learn from prior interruptions.** While [implementing](#) and [scaling up](#) these recovery programs have often proven challenging, we have learned [some lessons](#) that can guide districts looking to support students affected by extended school interruptions. For example, [targeted tutoring programs](#) (which serve smaller numbers of high-need students) tend to be more effective than district-wide programs, and summer programs can be effective in raising [math test scores](#) in particular.

### Case study 3: [Camp Fire](#)

The Camp Fire decimated much of the Paradise Valley School District in 2018, destroying most of the schools and over 18,000 structures in the town. In the aftermath of the fire, many students reported being too distracted and anxious to concentrate on school. When schools reopened (often in temporary locations) after the fire, school days were dedicated almost entirely to supporting students' social and emotional well-being. As schools got further out from the disaster, teachers emphasized the importance of striking a balance between mental health and academics. This includes setting high expectations for students and providing additional supports such as tutoring. School leaders also noted that getting students on track academically after a disaster is a slow process, sometimes taking many years after the initial event.

# Overall recommendations

The experiences shared across these case studies point to a clear throughline: schools play an essential role in recovery at every stage, from preparedness to long-term rebuilding. The summary table that follows translates those lessons into practical steps districts can take to strengthen their own plans.

|  | Before disaster strikes  | Immediately after a disaster  | Long-term recovery  |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>School building operations</b>            | <p>Develop a high-quality <a href="#">school emergency operations plan</a> for each school (see <a href="#">resources</a> for more examples).</p> <p>Establish a <a href="#">district emergency response team</a> and ensure someone in the district is familiar with <a href="#">FEMA guidelines</a> for schools.</p> | <p>If schools cannot reopen right away, <a href="#">provide opportunities</a> for the school community to come together socially and emotionally (when it is safe to do so).</p>  | <p>If rebuilding schools, ensure new schools are <a href="#">climate resilient</a>.</p>   |
| <b>Student mental health</b>                 | <p>Establish a dedicated <a href="#">trauma response team</a>.</p>   | <p>When schools reopen, make space for students to <a href="#">discuss their feelings</a>.</p> <p>Teach educators to recognize <a href="#">common responses to trauma</a> by age group.</p> <p>Screen students in schools for <a href="#">post-disaster symptoms</a>.</p> | <p>Embed trauma-sensitive practices such as <a href="#">universal behavioral screening tools</a>, adopting <a href="#">MTSS</a> to support a wide range of needs.</p> <p>Expect that trauma can be <a href="#">retriggered</a> by similar weather conditions in the future.</p> |
| <b>Academic recovery</b>                     | <p>Develop academic calendars with flexibility for school <a href="#">make-up days</a>.</p>  | <p>Make space for <a href="#">emotional recovery</a> before diving back into academics.</p>   | <p>Implement evidence-based <a href="#">academic recovery</a> strategies to support students who have fallen behind.</p>  |
| <b>Supporting students outside of school</b> | <p>Build connections with <a href="#">community partners</a> to support students experiencing homelessness.</p>  | <p>Support <a href="#">students experiencing homelessness</a> due to a disaster by connecting students with the <a href="#">district's liaison</a> for homeless children and youth.</p>   | <p>Continue connecting families facing housing instability with <a href="#">local resources and supports</a>.</p>   |
| <b>Educator needs</b>                        | <p>Implement policies to ensure educators will <a href="#">continue to be paid</a> if schools close due a disaster.</p>  | <p>Provide <a href="#">mental health supports</a> and <a href="#">resources</a> on <a href="#">burnout</a> for educators.</p>   | <p>Provide additional schedule flexibility for educators dealing with impacts of the disaster on their own families and homes.</p>  |
| <b>Communication</b>                         | <p>Set up <a href="#">emergency communication systems</a> to communicate with students, staff, and families in case of a disaster.</p>   | <p>Share <a href="#">clear and consistent information</a> with families via multiple platforms.</p> <p>Share resources with <a href="#">families</a> on talking to children about traumatic events.</p>   | <p>Address key milestones, especially the one-year anniversary.</p>   |



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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JAN26 | NWEA\_WF2562700