

A year ago, a tornado tore through the middle of Joplin, Mo., destroying homes, schools, and lives. The Magna Award-winning district beat the odds by starting school on time in August, but the reconstruction continues



Restoring

A few days after 445 Joplin High School graduates received their diplomas last May, board members and Superintendent C.J. Huff gathered in the school's parking lot for an emergency meeting. Minutes were taken on a two-by-four piece of wood. "Where do we start?" board member Randy Steele asked. In some form, questions like that have been asked every day since then, because when you're dealing with one of the

Glenn Cook

worst natural disasters in U.S. history, answers beget more questions.

On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado packing winds of more than 200 mph cut a three-quarter mile path through the middle of Joplin, Mo. The 32-minute storm, which started as the graduation ceremony ended at a nearby university, ultimately claimed 161 lives and caused \$3 billion in damage. More than 900 homes and buildings were destroyed, including a large community hospital, four schools, the district's technology center, and the central office.

Schools opened—on time—87 days after the tornado. On

Photography by Glenn Cook

Copyright 2012 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved. This article may be printed out and photocopied for individual or noncommercial educational use (50 copy limit), but may not be electronically re-created, stored, or distributed; or otherwise modified, reproduced, transmitted, republished, displayed or distributed. By granting this limited license, NSBA does not waive any of the rights or remedies otherwise available at law or in equity. By granting permission to use of our materials, NSBA does not intend to endorse any company or its products and services.



g the Future

April 21, days after taxpayers vote on a \$62 million bond issue to rebuild the district, this year's seniors will attend their prom. And on May 21, with President Obama in attendance, another class will graduate.

How a district goes from its darkest day to one for which the future looks challenging but ultimately bright, is a remarkable display of resiliency and leadership. In interviews conducted over the past several months—concluding as another round of spring tornadoes devastated other Midwestern communities—it's a fact lost on no one in Joplin.

Copyright 2012 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved. This article may be printed out and photocopied for individual or noncommercial educational use (50 copy limit), but may not be electronically re-created, stored, or distributed; or otherwise modified, reproduced, transmitted, republished, displayed or distributed. By granting this limited license, NSBA does not waive any of the rights or remedies otherwise available at law or in equity. By granting permission to use of our materials, NSBA does not intend to endorse any company or its products and services.

"If you have relationships, you can build resiliency," Huff says. "If you have resiliency, you can recover."

A race against time

In slicing through the middle of this city of 50,000, the tornado irreparably damaged Joplin High School, the Franklin Technology Center, a new middle school, and two elementary schools. Faced with daunting odds and overwhelming devastation, Huff and the school board started mapping out a plan.

"Within the first week, or nearing the end of that first week, we said we had to get moving," says Assistant



Superintendent Angie Besendorfer. “For our kids, it’s their only second grade year, their only junior year, and they need that. It can’t be a temporary education.”

Within 48 hours, a decision was made to hold summer school as scheduled; later, it was extended through July. The board agreed to provide transportation and two meals a day, giving students “six to seven weeks of opportunities to have somewhere safe to go” while parents tried to start rebuilding.

Meanwhile, Huff boldly announced that school would start Aug. 17—on schedule. The board granted the administrative team emergency discretion to sign contracts for the new buildings. Huff says administrators remained in “constant communication” with the board, especially with Ashley Micklethwaite and Jim Kimbrough, the president and vice president, respectively.

“All ‘emergency powers’ meant was that we didn’t have to have a board meeting to make a decision,” Huff says. “We were able to expedite things and didn’t have to get all the board members together, and that was one of the biggest pieces for us in terms of hitting the Aug. 17 date. The simple fact that the board realized their role was to be supportive was huge, because we had so many decisions to make on so many different fronts.”

Elementary school students would move into facilities that had been vacated. Ninth- and 10th-grade students

would go to the Memorial Education Center, which had been a facility serving early childhood and special education students. A vacant department store at Northpark Mall would be converted into a campus for juniors and seniors, while a warehouse at the Crossroads Center Business and Distribution Park would house the middle school.

Once contracts were finalized, architects had less than two months to develop and execute the plans. “No question, it was a race against time,” Steele says. “But we made it.”

On Aug. 17, Huff visited every elementary school and had his picture taken with each of the district’s 606 kindergartners, an annual tradition. Three months later, he was named as one of the “2011 Heroes Among Us” by *People Magazine*.

“It was something to get me focused,” Huff says of the Aug. 17 start date. “I know what it takes to run a school, and for me and my team it was important to have a goal. When I thought about our role in this disaster, it was that we are in the kid business. We have to get the kids out of the debris and get them out of situations that are unsafe. We need to make sure they are fed and clothed. And then we can start educating them.”

‘The things you take for granted aren’t there’

Flash back to April 2011, six weeks before graduation day and the tornado. Huff, Steele, and administrator Kim Vann are at

Photography by Glenn Cook



NSBA's annual conference in San Francisco to accept the Magna Award grand prize for Joplin's Bright Futures program.

The three are all smiles as they talk about a no-cost program that—through the innovative use of social networking and a growing number of community, business, and faith-based partnerships—has led to a 52-percent reduction in the high school dropout rate in just a year. At the conference, Huff says Bright Futures, which is designed to meet “every child’s needs within a 24-hour period,” has “turned my whole world upside down.”

In one year, Vann noted at the conference, Bright Futures received more than \$500,000 in donations. The program’s Facebook page had added more than 4,000 fans who actively use the site.

In the days immediately after May 22, Facebook became the only source of communication for many families. One post, noting that the district was “in the process of accounting for the safety of our students, faculty, and staff,” had more than 400 comments in just eight hours.

“I can’t dial out, but I’m safe,” said one. “I pray for the safety of the rest,” said another. “Thanks for checking on everyone,” a third said.

Requests for clothing, shoes, and nonperishable food were being posted to the Bright Futures page within hours after the storm. Almost a year later, the page has more than

6,000 fans and the Bright Futures program is poised to go national, with a separate nonprofit board.

“Dr. Huff says it best: We were being prepared for this without even knowing it with this program,” Vann says. “We don’t know what we would have done without it.”

Understandably, this year the program has focused on boosting staff and student morale and trying to “lighten the load a little.” A “Sunshine Squad,” for example, brings in lunch for the staff and treats for students.

As seasons have changed and families move back into their homes, the program has fielded more pleas for clothing and other goods. Today, Bright Futures still receives six to 10 requests every day.

“The things you take for granted aren’t there,” Vann says.

What’s in between

Heading into Joplin, on the south side off Interstate 44, it’s hard to tell that anything has happened. The north side of town looks the same, too. It’s what’s in between—and the people left behind—that have changed forever.

Steele, a Joplin native, is an amiable tour guide whose house is within two blocks of the storm’s path. “You can’t escape it,” he says, maneuvering his car through the dark, damaged area late one evening. “I drive through it every day.”

Earlier that day, Steele had gone to the grand reopening



of the town's Wal-Mart, central to the rebirth of the devastated area. His daughter works there, and he was happy to have some semblance of normalcy return to family life.

It took much longer for that to happen for Micklethwaite, whose home was seriously damaged in the storm. St. John's Regional Medical Center, where she works as a grant and community benefits manager, was destroyed. She lived with her husband in an RV on their property for seven months.

"We're back in the house," she says, noting they moved in on Christmas Eve. "I no longer have to go to the bathroom in boots and carrying an umbrella."

At her job, she has since focused on long-term recovery and patient mental health issues, plus the programs that will help others "continue well in our new world." Interviewed on the nine-month anniversary of the tornado, she talks about what's ahead.

"The one-year anniversary date is important in terms of people's psychological well-being," she says. "We know we have kids and families and staff members who are struggling and, as storm season approaches, it will be very difficult. We know we have triggers. It's how you manage them."

Keep looking forward

For administrators like Kerry Sachetta, management has

taken on new meaning. In 32 minutes, Missouri's 2009 Principal of the Year saw the place he'd called his professional home for a decade turn to rubble. Because of concerns about asbestos, administrators were allowed back into the high school only a handful of times to retrieve key items; other items were left exposed to the elements for months before demolition finally began in February.

"We just had to leave everything there," he says.

Rather than buy new high school textbooks, the district started a one-to-one program, using a \$1 million grant from the United Arab Emirates to outfit all 2,200 students with laptops. That's a dream for many administrators, but a challenge when the program must start in two different, temporary buildings.

"It wasn't on the bucket list, I'll admit," Sachetta says. "A principal sits in his office during the summer and starts planning the new year. What are our goals? What are our objectives? What meetings are we going to have? We couldn't do that last summer; we were just worried about getting the buildings open."

What's impressive about the temporary campuses, such as the high school at the mall, is that they have the look and feel of traditional school buildings. Joplin's logo, the eagle, is prominently displayed. The campuses are open and clean.

Photography by Glenn Cook



Equally impressive is the support the board and administration have given to staff and students. Schools have extra counselors on staff. Transportation is provided to the student's base school, regardless of where the student lives. Teachers are excused when necessary to be at home for storm-related repairs, with the district picking up the cost of substitutes. For the high school staff, extra professional development—focusing on the one-to-one program—has been ongoing.

"From an instructional standpoint, we're doing everything we can for teachers so that they get this new way of working," Sachetta says. "If it doesn't start with the teachers, it doesn't get to the kids. If they're not comfortable, it's not going to work."

Despite everything, Sachetta is quick to say that failure is not an option, but he's also a realist. He recognizes that his school's test scores likely won't be as high as they have been. And he knows he likely will lose some staff, perhaps six or seven, to retirement.

"Good teaching is good teaching, no matter how it's done," he says. "Is it possible that our state assessment scores will dip a little as we go through this? Sure, it's possible. Do I want it to happen? No. Will I do everything I can to prevent it from happening? Yes. We'll do what we have to

do, and we'll keep looking forward."

Rebuilding for the long term

Looking ahead can be tough, especially after months of 24/7 weeks. Without fail, everyone acknowledges burnout is a concern.

"I hit the wall before I went on vacation," says Huff, who didn't sleep for 66 hours after the tornado and averaged fewer than five hours a night for the next two months. "I didn't have anything left. I would be lying in bed thinking at night, 'What do we have to do the next day?'"

The vacation helped, although Huff notes that he has gained weight and has not been able to get as much rest as he would like. "It's hard," he says during a joint interview with Besendorfer and Steele. "The emotional baggage is most difficult for me. I have a hard time with it still. Thinking about the loss and the people who have been impacted is harder than anything else for me to deal with."

Besendorfer's focus was—in addition to her day-to-day crisis management duties, which rarely ended before midnight—on coordinating and leading trips of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members to 24 schools in eight states. The goal: to learn how design features could be incorporated into Joplin's new schools.

“It’s a challenge,” she says. “You just keep going.”

As winter moved into spring, the focus moved to the rebuilding effort. State and federal sources, plus insurance, are expected to fund \$121.3 million of the \$185 million needed to build and renovate tornado-damaged facilities, which now will have safe rooms and 21st century technology. The board has bought 80 parcels of land around the existing high school so that it can be rebuilt in the same general area; the former school, built in the 1950s, was in a flood plain.

“I had an ‘Aha!’ moment about a month ago, and the rest of

the board did as well,” Micklethwaite says in early March. “We were all focused on getting kids back to school, and when that happened, the community and school board had a big sigh of relief. There was a huge celebration: Our work is done. Then reality set in with me, realizing that was the easy part.”

The hard part, she says, is rebuilding Joplin for the longterm. Even harder is having to ask taxpayers for money, especially when getting streetlights is cause for celebration in many neighborhoods. The district has received more than \$5.5 million from individuals and foundations around

‘Indomitable spirit’ of Tuscaloosa, Ala., community helps it recover

Lawrence Hardy



The rain and hail ceased. The wind died down. In some areas—Dorothy Richardson’s neighborhood among them—the sun was peeking out. Elsewhere that morning in Tuscaloosa, Ala., children happy to have a rare Wednesday without school were out skateboarding. It was actually turning out to be a pretty nice day.

Six hours earlier, on April 27, 2011, Richardson had cancelled classes in the 10,500-student Tuscaloosa City Schools amid what she called a violent and “scary” thunderstorm that whipped through the city before dawn with winds approaching 50 miles per hour. Now it was almost noon under a balmy spring sky, and the interim superintendent wondered if she’d made the right call.

“Don’t second guess yourself,” said her husband, who had left work early because of the weather. “What is it you always say?”

Err on the side of safety—of both students and staff. As an assistant superintendent for more than a decade, Richardson was charged with following threatening weather forecasts and staying in touch with the local Emergency Management Agency, the city transportation department, and the surrounding Tuscaloosa

County Schools. Richardson always lived by that rule, but it helped to have her husband’s support.

The nice day didn’t last long. At about 4 p.m., the sky darkened. A vicious tornado that forecasters said was likely due to historic weather conditions touched down a little more than an hour later. It cut across an interstate highway, tore through downtown Tuscaloosa, and left a swath of debris a half mile wide.

Forty-five people, including two students from Richardson’s district, were killed in Tuscaloosa as a multitude of storms hit Alabama and nearby states over several days. More than a 10th of the city was destroyed. Alberta Elementary was gone, and a combined middle and elementary school was heavily damaged.

Yet, tragic as it was, it could have been worse. If Richardson had not decided to cancel school that day, when the storm hit, at about 5:10 p.m., the schools still would have been bustling with staff and students in after-school activities, sports, and extended-day programs.

“Had buses been at the schools, it would have been different,” says Richardson, who since has retired. “We would have had a different story to tell.”

Coping, dealing with tragedy

Like practically everyone else who could get to a TV, Alberta Elementary Principal Brenda Parker was following the tornado’s projected path from her home. The monster storm appeared to be heading right for Skyland Elementary, so Parker began making mental plans about accommodating Skyland’s students if that building was hit.

Skyland wasn’t touched. Parker’s school was destroyed.

She received the news in a text message from a parent, “But I didn’t have any official word,” Parker says, “so I really didn’t process this. ... Of course, my fear was that it was true.”

The small community of Alberta is “a city within a city,” Parker says. This neighborhood is largely poor—more than 90 percent of students receive federally subsidized lunches—but close knit. And the seven-year-old school—“a beautiful facility,” Parker says—was a source of pride.

Minutes after the tornado passed, Parker walked toward the

the world, but ultimately that's not enough.

"There's a feeling out in the community that, because there was such an outpouring of support, that the district doesn't need this bond issue," Micklethwaite says. "A third of our community is really hurting, and financially directly impacted, me being one. I had insurance. Am I going to be made whole? No. Do I want my property taxes to go up? No. But I think this is the best investment I can make for our future."

No question, Joplin officials are focused on the future, not the past. They also know that getting back to normal

will take time.

"My elementary school is gone. My middle school is gone. And now we're about to tear down my high school," Steele says during the late-night drive in the darkness. "That's tough for anyone who grew up here to deal with. But I have to remember that they're just buildings, in the end. The important part is looking ahead." ■

Glenn Cook (gcook@nsba.org) is editor-in-chief of *American School Board Journal*.

from tornado's destruction

school. Other residents, as if in a dream, also were on the streets. "Some knew where they were going," Parker says. "Some did not."

Half of Alberta Elementary was flattened; it was a total loss. But there wasn't time for grieving.

"My staff was phenomenal," Parker says. "I began getting news that night about how many students they had contacted. My teachers, counselors—all of them—were in the neighborhood. They were walking the streets, [looking] in shelters."

Parker and other administrators had to quickly find space in two other schools: Tuscaloosa Magnet and, ironically, Skyland Elementary. The district had to cobble together bus service where there was none, because most of Alberta's students had walked to school.

Many families lost their homes or found their workplaces destroyed. The district and numerous volunteers distributed food, clothing, and shoes.

"We had shoes for every child," Parker recalls. "We just brought children in and they tried on shoes."

Staff and volunteers sifted through the rubble, trying to salvage books, furniture, photographs, anything that would remind students of their old school and make them feel more at home in their new surroundings. One volunteer found a quilt, made by an instructional assistant who was also a professional quilter. Decorated with student drawings and other symbols of unity that had been ironed into the fabric, it said in bold letters "Peace Builders," which is the school's moniker.

"That quilt represents who we are," Parker says.

Looking to the future

Board members are supposed to set policy. They don't run the district or delve into the minutiae of operations. But when a tornado rips through your district, incapacitating one school and leveling another, there is no "minutiae." Tasks as simple as getting scissors and paper to kindergartners assume new importance.

In the days immediately after the storm, Parker said, board members regularly visited the site to help with the cleanup and provide support. One board member, Kelly Horwitz, was there often, handing out her card and asking parents and teachers what

they needed.

"The lines of responsibility, in some respects, were blurred," Horwitz says. "We always knew that school boards were supposed to be the policymakers." But after the storm, "everyone was just doing everything they could."

For Horwitz and fellow board member Marvin Lucas, who also visited often, "it was, 'What do you need? Let me know what you need,'" Parker recalls. "When things became very difficult, knowing that there was someone to support you meant more to me than they will ever know."

In the months after the tornado, the board has since dealt with a number of broad policy issues. For example, the board voted in principle to rebuild Alberta Elementary because of its importance to the district and the community. Just what role Alberta or any of the schools will play, however, will be determined after a district-wide demographic study. (The district lost about 200 students after the storm.)

The district also is working with the mayor's office and other agencies to ensure that any rebuilding is well coordinated and reflects the kind of Tuscaloosa they envision for the future.

They've had experience with this kind of collaboration before. The night before the tornado, the school board recognized leaders of a homegrown program called Helping Education/Linking Parents (HELP). Just two weeks earlier, the program had won a Magna Award from *ASBJ* and the National School Boards Association.

HELP was recognized because it reduced the district's dropout rate and out-of-school suspensions through the collaborative work of the schools, law enforcement, the district attorney's office, city government, and other groups. Now Tuscaloosa is tapping into that network again.

"Despite how difficult it might look and the challenges there are, your community will come together, and rally, and provide the resources," says Dan Meissner, the board chairman. "It's very [gratifying] to see how people have an indomitable spirit."

Lawrence Hardy (lhardy@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.