



ECS Policy Brief

Untapped Resources: Engaging Students in Preparation, Response and Recovery

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Education Commission
of the **S t a t e s**

By Terry Pickeral, Tiffani Lennon and Maurice Elias
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“August 29, the day when the gypsies saw a rattle in southern Louisiana. No one was expecting her, but she came: Hurricane Katrina.”

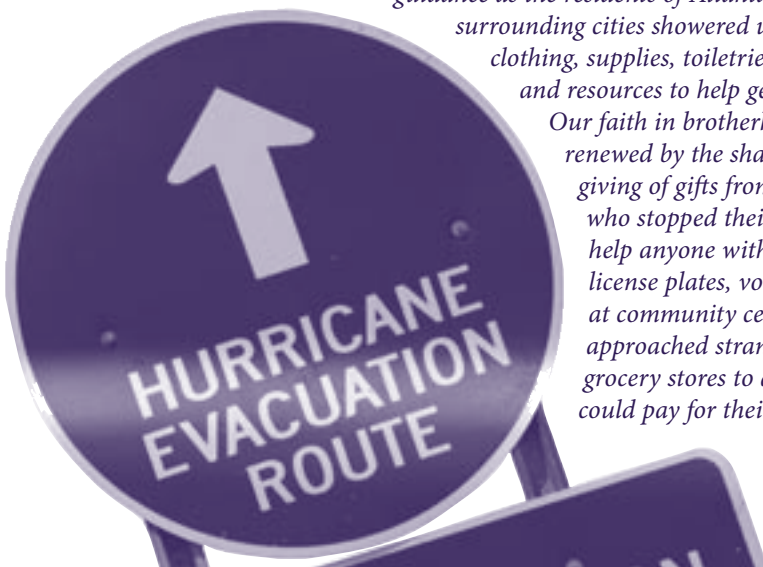
~ Hurricane Katrina Survivor
Simone Williams, age 16

INTRODUCTION

Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, the earthquake in Pakistan, the landslides in Guatemala and the tsunami that hit the Pacific Rim countries grabbed the attention of the public in 2005. The devastating effects of these natural disasters affected a vast number of Americans. Hurricane Katrina survivor, Rachel S. Williams, reminds us:

The year 2005 represents the busiest mixture of life-changing events I've seen in all of my years. Looking back on the way things were, I can say that my family life was moving forward, steadily and exceedingly. Yet, on Friday, August 26, 2005, our evacuation plans began, and my family started to pack their clothes for a three-day trip to Atlanta, Georgia. We weren't prepared for the life-changing circumstances that lay ahead. For days, we watched in horror as our hometown was torn apart by wind, rain, flooding, tornadoes, confusion, looting, violence and administrative division. Many of us cried, most of us were angry, and all of us were afraid of the challenges awaiting us.

And yet, there was an overwhelming outpour of love, generosity and guidance as the residents of Atlanta and surrounding cities showered us with food, clothing, supplies, toiletries, money and resources to help get us started. Our faith in brotherhood was renewed by the shameless giving of gifts from people who stopped their cars to help anyone with Louisiana license plates, volunteered at community centers, and approached strangers in grocery stores to ask if they could pay for their food.



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Who can fail to be touched by the outpouring of caring, compassion and sharing by Americans of all ages, and in particular the expressions of care from young Americans? This is another manifestation of the greatness of America, first acknowledged by Alex de Tocqueville as he wrote of America's rules of democracy, the customs of the people, sense of community and expressions of compassion.¹

America is a great country with dispositions to help those in need and to do so in very communal ways. Yet, citizens tend to be shocked into action by tragedy and crisis, only to find attention wavering as the events move from the front page to the back pages and then out of the news altogether. This is not a new phenomenon; in its 2002 annual report, Education Week released a "report card" on the September 11, 2001 tragedy and found that the powerful lessons of that event faded relatively quickly.²

Because the lessons seem to fade so quickly despite extraordinary provocation, it is necessary to revisit exactly what the lessons are. Two observations have been most striking: the way in which young people respond to genuine opportunities to be helpful, meet others' needs and make a real difference in others' lives; and that the destabilization highlighted by disasters is much more common than most people appreciate, especially in the lives of youth living in disadvantaged circumstances.

This brief addresses how to engage and mobilize young people in order to prepare them for when disaster strikes. Perhaps more importantly, this brief seeks to do so in sustainable ways to avoid desensitizing youth to the effects of disaster, and prevent wavering attention.

HELPING STUDENTS PREPARE FOR DISASTER

There are two ways to serve students – help them when disaster strikes their community, and empower them to help others in need. The purpose of this brief is to emphasize the latter: involve and prepare students for civic engagement as a means to prepare for and respond to disasters, if or when disaster strikes.

Students must be already engaged on a local level so when disaster strikes, they are ready and able to help. Disaster preparation programs should include engaging and preparing students to participate in everyday actions in support of citizenship, from helping to clothe and feed the poor to advocating for policies to ensure safe environments. Civic-mindedness does not receive much media attention, yet it is vital to disaster prevention and response.



Hurricane Katrina laid bare the social, ethnic and economic stratification that had coexisted in the city of New Orleans; for many children in this city, life was already filled with disasters. They may not have been as dramatic as the floods, but perhaps more preventable, and even more dangerous. Most communities, like New Orleans, have a plethora of opportunities for civic engagement, even before disaster strikes. These opportunities will allow students to become involved, committed to and vested in their communities.

MOVING DISASTER PREVENTION AND PREPARATION TO THE CENTER OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Preparedness for disaster need not wait for cataclysmic events to take place. We all know how inured children (and adults) become to fire drills. The response we are asked to undertake renders the event unrealistic, distant and totally disconnected from our lives. There are two reasons for this: (1) disasters are infrequent and appear far away, not real or urgent; and (2) paradoxically, the incessant parade of disasters might induce a kind of fear or fatalism in students. By reframing these events, we can better prepare and empower our students for lasting community involvement. We need an engaged citizenry that endures so interest does not fade.

For preparation to be effective, the activities must be meaningful, tangible and salient. Poor environmental circumstances in and around the school and community; and the life difficulties faced by those who lack shelter, food, health care and means for a livelihood can provide opportunities for students to make positive contributions, serve others and avert disaster by actively and regularly participating in their community.

Skills gained in local service-learning projects are invaluable in response to disaster. Any activity that engages students in how to tap local resources, provide assistance and determine needs is an asset in disaster relief. That's why it's important for youth to be as interested in the homeless in their communities as they are in the homeless on the Gulf Coast or the Pacific Rim. The Jewish philosopher and physician Maimonides said the most powerful forms of help are local. We are morally obligated to help locally, and then go out concentrically, and help others as we are able. He also said, the highest form of helping is when both the helper and helped are anonymous, to preserve the dignity of the latter and to ensure the purity of motives of the former.

The goal is to use the recent disasters as an opportunity to move students' concerns more to the center of everyday life; to instill in students a high sense of everyday responsibility for schools, communities and the world at large, and a high sense of caring, not only of those who are victims of extreme trauma but for those who suffer locally, from less spectacular forms of disaster. In this way, we avoid sensationalizing things in a non-sustainable way. Community service is about strengthening all environments, turning all citizens into actual or potential helpers, and getting ready for potential disasters now by working in communities on smaller-scale but equally important issues.

ACQUIRING THE TENACITY AND SKILLS FOR DISASTER PREVENTION

All citizens and communities should engage in the prevention of, preparation for, response to, and recovery from situations and events that threaten or cause significant harm. Safe and healthy communities require the development and coordination of knowledgeable and skilled individuals who are able to assist in times of need. This is an activity that requires a blend of the intellect and social-emotional competencies. Terry Bergeson, superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington, has phrased these competencies as, "skills and heart."³ It is the hallmark of citizens in a democracy to not only feel compassion for others but to be able to mobilize, organize and act on that compassion.

Policies that encourage student engagement seek to develop the capacities of individuals and communities to address emergencies and disasters in all forms and magnitudes. It is impossible to know exactly when a major threat will become a reality, but student engagement activities can help organize schools to manage harmful situations when they occur and mitigate long-term damage. They also prepare students to participate effectively and appropriately in community-wide disaster preparation activities.

Students, properly trained and supervised, can add their passion, sense of caring and contributions to schools and community agencies responding to a wide range of traumatic events. The perspective is developmental – a 5th grader comforting an upset preschooler or kindergarten student is an important precursor to being able to deal with more serious circumstances in the future.

POLICIES ENCOURAGING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITIES

What can state policymakers do to assist districts and schools in establishing effective processes and protocols to prepare for and deal with everyday and rare calamitous disasters?

In the 2003 report *The Civic Mission of Schools*, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic and Engagement (CIRCLE) reaffirmed that schools have an essential role in ensuring students grow up to be thoughtful and informed participants in their communities, motivated and able to act politically, and possess moral and civic virtues. While schools cannot have sole responsibility to accomplish these ends, they can create an ideal learning laboratory to counter certain trends:

- Students are attracted to serve by the notoriety involved; as long as helping makes big headlines, it is valued; if it's not a media-labeled disaster, it's not worth lending a hand
- Young people lack faith in the effectiveness of government to help where needed
- Popular culture continues to support cynicism and disinterest in civic engagement in favor of materialism, individualism and an orientation toward bending rules, getting breaks and making deals.⁴

These trends are subtly reinforced by the attention and celebration of heroic helpers in spectacular initial contexts, and departs from the “scene” as the work gets difficult or routine and the victims appear less appealing. The existing disaster mentality does not encourage youth to grapple with and engage in service addressing more chronic events like a lack of access to health care, long-standing problems of hunger and disease, poverty and global climate change.

Policymakers can create policies that encourage schools to support service learning and other community-based pedagogies. Policies can include support for:

- Course development support (research)
- Professional development (training)
- School-community partnerships (infrastructure)
- Building a network of teachers (learning community).

Educational leaders in every state and territory should bring civic education to the forefront and create mandatory K-12 curricular- and service-learning-based approach to preparing students for all of life's tests – the everyday, the episodic and the cataclysmic. Can this compete with the pressure of preparing students for standardized tests? As Nel Noddings of Columbia University's Teachers College has said, “Our children are being fed intellectual junk food, and we would do well to insist on a healthier educational diet.”⁵ In fact, our students *are* insisting on healthier educational diets. “Everyone in my group wanted to get involved. It made me angry that I couldn't help, locked up at home and unable to leave,” explained one Mississippi student who wanted to help after Hurricane Katrina.

KEY COMPONENTS IN DISASTER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Opportunities for engagement. Students need to be engaged in their communities in order to acquire the endurance and skills necessary to effectively help in disaster relief.

Professional development programs for teachers. Professional development courses should train teachers to involve students in pre- and post-disaster assistance in order to increase the effectiveness and timeliness of the response. Such courses should also train teachers to incorporate student-led community involvement into academic curricula.

Student involvement in disaster plans. Being involved in creating disaster plans allows students to see the direct relationship between cause and action. By working through the process of disaster preparedness, students will be able to become proactive in their habits, lessening the impact of the disaster on recovery.

Disaster-related curriculum that meets academic standards. For example, curricula addressing environmental issues provide long-term impact by reducing risk factors for natural disaster. Raising awareness of efficient use of natural resources reduces the strain on the system, thereby reducing risk; and learning to become more environmentally responsible and developing alternative sources of energy can impact energy use, reduce reliance on the oil industry, lessen the effects of pollution, and grow new habits that sustain and nurture the environment. These are all possible outcomes to service-learning projects, which focus on environmental issues.

The following are ways that students can be engaged in activities to prepare for and respond to disasters, while meeting academic standards:

- Prepare and distribute emergency kits in communities
- Assess security and safety needs of the school
- Create emergency plans for their homes and schools
- Research disasters and the effect on communities
- Learn first aid
- Teach others how to prepare for and respond to emergencies that could occur in the community
- Develop public service announcements about disaster preparedness for the local cable channel
- Write stories to help younger children understand what to do in an emergency
- Organize health and safety fairs in the community
- Help local flood victims.



EXAMPLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

In Wisconsin, the **State Citizen Corps Council** supports two initiatives aimed at engaging youth in the process of disaster preparedness. *Responding to Emergencies and Disasters with Youth (READY)* trains teachers and young people in strategies that will help them prevent, prepare for and respond to serious, unexpected situations that require immediate action. In the summer of 2005, 25 teens participated in READY camps that provided this critical training.

Wisconsin Terrorism Awareness and Prevention (WisTAP) is a Wisconsin crime-prevention program focused on discouraging, detecting and defeating terrorism in America by encouraging citizens to become participants in their own security.

Resources are provided to educators through the state Department of Public Instruction's Web site, such as resources posted in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Red Cross also provided a full-day training on disaster preparedness for AmeriCorps members.

<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/katrinainfo.html>

The **National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC)** engages 5th through 8th graders in the Gulf Coast region to address their communities' long-term recovery needs as part of the Gulf Coast *WalkAbout*. The service-learning-based summer school program works with youths in school districts where at least 50% of students have been displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *WalkAbout* engages youths in community-based service projects and strengthens their academic skills. The program was developed by NYLC as part of its *Resources for Recovery* initiative and funded by the State Farm Companies Foundation.



Five sites (some connecting multiple schools) have been selected to participate in the Gulf Coast WalkAbout. “Displaced youths are still in a very vulnerable position. Their entire lives have been disrupted,” said NYLC President and CEO Jim Kielsmeier. “WalkAbout addresses academic needs, provides structure to their summers, and perhaps most importantly, taps young people as community assets. Communities reap tangible benefits, and young people are engaged in active learning.”⁶

At each site, 100-130 students will work with teams of four teachers, nine college students and two adult volunteers. The teams will assess local needs, plan and implement service-learning projects and link their work to academic goals. Using NYLC’s WalkAbout curriculum, students will learn about environmental and natural science, emergency preparedness and response, and oral history. Following the completion of the Gulf Coast WalkAbout, NYLC will use the curriculum and feedback from the Gulf Coast sites to extend the WalkAbout model to other communities. NYLC and State Farm anticipate further collaboration with Gulf Coast and other states in efforts to involve students in disaster recovery and preparedness through WalkAbout service-learning approaches during the summer as well as throughout the year.

<http://www.nylc.org>

The Institute for Global Education and Service Learning (IGESL) recently implemented the *Youth Organized for Disaster Action program (YODA)*. YODA is a service-learning program that helps young people prepare their families, schools and communities for unexpected emergencies and disasters. The purpose of the program is to address homeland security and disaster response concerns by engaging students in service-learning activities in their schools and communities.

IGESL and its partners, PennSERVE and the New Jersey Commission on National and Community Service, are providing students with a structured learning experience that allows them to enhance academic achievement, develop workplace-readiness skills, demonstrate active citizenship, and give back to their communities through service-learning while planning for and responding to health, safety, and security concerns in their schools or communities, including natural disasters, school violence, medical emergencies or terrorist acts.

http://www.igesl.org/html/homeland_security_programs.html

SUMMARY

Policymakers must provide authentic opportunities for students to make societal contributions in seemingly ordinary ways in order to prepare them for enduring, sustainable engagement when man-made and natural disasters occur. Students must also be engaged in assisting their schools in preparation for and response to disasters. In doing so, students will acquire the dispositions and demonstrations of caring for others, and they will be armed with the skills to prevent, prepare for and respond not only to disasters but also to the everyday events in their schools and communities that require a courageous response. It is both in the students’ interest, and in the interest of society that they are given an opportunity to serve in age-appropriate, meaningful ways.

We have untapped resources and they are the citizens in our schools. Our students can contribute to local, state, national and global incidents in ways that are both educational and energizing. No one looks forward to responding to disasters, but in the world today, we must prepare for them. Providing opportunities for students to contribute prepares them not only for current events but establishes their knowledge, skills and dispositions as active, principled citizens.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) through the National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) will continue to monitor and share state and district policies, quality programs, pedagogies and partnerships with policymakers, education leaders and other education stakeholders encouraging the engagement of youth in disaster preparation and response.



RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to recognize the contributions of Rachel S. Williams and Simone Williams. ECS met Rachel when she was awarded the 2005 Frank Newman Leadership Award, and later learned about her family's triumph in the face of disaster.

Hurricane Help for Students: Providing Assistance to Schools Serving Students Displaced by Hurricane Katrina
<http://www.hurricanehelpforschools.gov/>

Hurricane Katrina Relief Service-Learning Resources and Tools
http://www.servicelearning.org/nslc/hurricane_katrina/index.php

National Youth Leadership Council, Resources for Recovery: Young People, Service, Learning, and Disaster
http://www.nylc.org/inaction_init.cfm?oid=5130

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Preparing Students for the Tests of Life, Annual Report (2002).
http://www.casel.org/downloads/Annual_report_FINAL.pdf

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ENDNOTES

¹ Alex de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835.

² *Education Week*, 2002 Annual Report, (2002).

³ Terry Bergenson, Personal Interview with Terry Pickeral.

⁴ Cynthia Gibson and Peter Levine, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), (2003), p.11-13.

⁵ Nel Noddings, *The Phi Delta Kappan*. (2004), p. 494.

⁶ James Kielsmeier, "NYLC Helps Gulf Coast Students Rebuild Their Communities," *National Youth Leadership Council*, (May 15, 2006).
http://www.nylc.org/happening_newsarticle.cfm?oid=5259.



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