



A burnt school bus at Aveson Charter School on Jan. 13. Credit: Frederic J. Brown via Getty Images.

THE IMPACTS OF THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES ON STUDENTS: *Lessons for Schools Nationwide*

The devastating wildfires that erupted in Southern California in early January 2025 were historic in scale and impact.

They [claimed dozens of lives](#), destroyed thousands of homes and businesses, and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Amidst this devastation, over 1,000 schools across four counties — Los Angeles, San Diego, Ventura, and San Bernardino — were forced to close, affecting the education and well-being of hundreds of thousands of students. Many of these schools were within evacuation zones or near the fire's path, leaving [several tragically destroyed](#).

The scale of students and families affected has been massive — with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) alone serving more than [half a million students](#). But what does it mean when so many students have their learning disrupted? Who is most impacted by these disruptions? And how should the rest of the country prepare for their own risks of similar events?

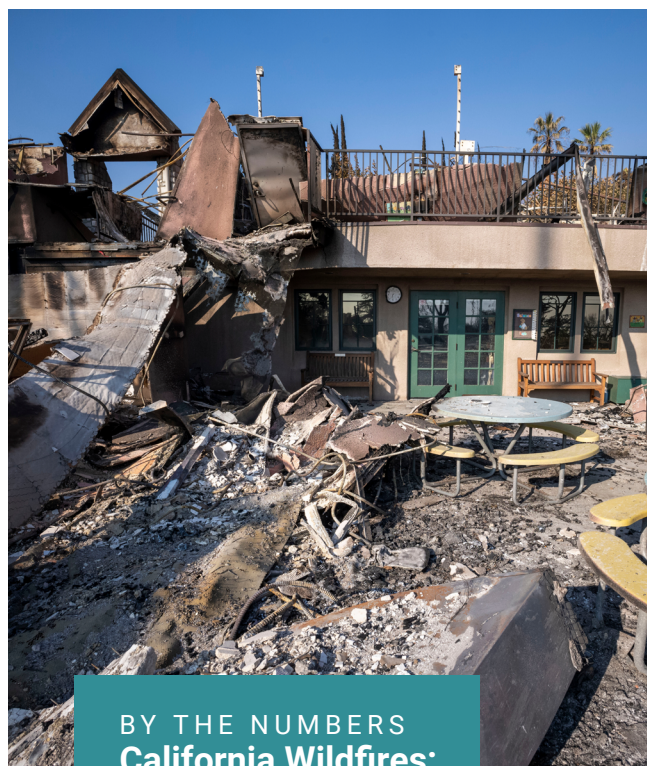
The Scope of the Disruption: How Many Students Were Impacted

In January, over 725,000 students were affected by [school closures caused by wildfires](#). Some districts were closed for two or three days while district leaders assessed risk and followed statewide evacuation orders, while others, like Pasadena Unified School District, kept [some schools closed for 10+ days](#).

Missing a week or more of school is detrimental, especially for students who are already [chronically absent](#). A [meta-analysis](#) of the impacts of weather-related school closures found that missing one week of school results in a learning loss equivalent to two or three weeks. According to [Attendance Works](#), missing 10% of

school (or about 18 days) negatively affects a student's academic performance, and can lead to stunted literacy development, disengagement, course failure, or even dropping out of school.

As wildfire events continue to increase in frequency and intensity, this risk is heightened for students in California.



BY THE NUMBERS
California Wildfires:
Students Impacted

725,000+
students impacted

MORE THAN

1/10

are students with
disabilities

3/4

are socio-
economically
disadvantaged

2/5

students are
multilingual
learners

2/3

are Latino

School Closures Harm Students' Academics and Well-Being

Disproportionate Impacts to Vulnerable Populations

Students from vulnerable backgrounds were impacted the most by these closures. Three-quarters come from socioeconomically disadvantaged households — a population that may disproportionately experience home-based challenges such as food and nutrition insecurity, limited access to technology or WiFi, poor supervision, or unstable housing. For these students, a disruption in learning can widen inequalities and [exacerbate academic gaps](#).

Two-thirds of the affected students are Latino, and nearly 40% of the students impacted by the closures are multilingual learners. Yet, California schools currently fail to provide the high-quality educational experiences that are needed to close equity gaps for both Latino students and multilingual learners. Latino students are the [least likely](#) of any student group to say they

experience a high level of support at school, have insufficient access to early childhood education, and are more likely to feel disconnected from their schools.

Multilingual learners already face challenges in school due to language barriers and California struggles to provide the resources and instruction necessary to fully support them — with the [latest state assessments](#) showing only around 10% of these students are at grade level in English Language Arts and math. The disruptions caused by school closures only amplify these difficulties as multilingual learners lose out on critical in-person language support. In California, [about 8% of households](#) include a family member who is an undocumented immigrant, and immigrant families often depend on their local schools for supports and services. Additionally, immigrant students and their families are already facing additional stress and [fears](#) of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids.

Additionally, 10% of the affected students have disabilities, adding another layer of complexity to the situation. These students often rely on specialized services and support through their schools, which become unavailable when schools are shut down.



Trauma and Displacement

School closures exacerbate existing [trauma](#). Many families have been displaced without access to shelter, clothing, and food, which can affect students' emotional well-being and academic performance. Students may have been impacted by parental stress, deaths, or traumatic injuries in their communities. The psychological strain on students, their families, and educators due to ongoing evacuations and wildfires will not go away overnight. Even when students return back to school, they will require robust support of their physical and mental health.

Loss of Access to Vital Community Resources

Missing school is more than just not sitting in the classroom — schools are community hubs for many students. They provide food, a safe environment, and social networks. When students don't have access to their safe spaces they may lack stability, supportive and nurturing relationships, and the holistic support necessary for children's social-emotional needs.

Extreme weather and climate-related issues do not exist in a vacuum. There are [reports](#) that attendance remains low in Southern California, even after schools have been fully reopened. This is because several schools were directly affected or burned down, and many families now lack stable housing — reports of one or two days of closure may not reflect the whole story. With an existing [chronic absenteeism issue](#), schools are now working to get kids to come to school every day, in an environment where [immigrant](#) and [LGBTQ+](#) families [may be feeling more unsafe](#) than usual.

The Nationwide Need for Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

Extreme Weather Will Continue to Increase

Wildfires are just one example of extreme weather events affecting education systems across the U.S. In late 2024, hurricanes closed schools across 20 districts in North Carolina, a growing number of districts [now delay their first day of school due to extreme heat](#), and nearly [10,000 schools](#) have closed due to other [extreme weather events](#) in the 2024-25 school year. These closings may not have made it into national news, but disruptions like these are happening nationwide. State and school leaders must acknowledge this [new reality](#) and take steps to be prepared.



Aveson School of Leaders was burned by the Eaton Fire on Wednesday, Jan. 15. Credit: Jason Armond via Getty Images

Building Resilience in Schools and Ensuring Equitable Recovery

All students deserve access to [Learning-Ready Facilities](#) that are structurally sound, comfortable, provide a safe and healthy environment for learning, and have effective equipment to meet every student's needs. To fully achieve this, leaders must prioritize immediate and long-term investments in climate-resilient infrastructure that can withstand wildfires, severe weather, and storms to keep students safe during extreme heat, cold, or periods of poor outdoor air quality. This is particularly important in communities that serve large numbers of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. It is these students who are [more likely](#) to face heightened challenges after extreme weather events.

We also need to value and invest in [school-based supports](#), both acute and long-term. Kids are resilient, but trauma requires mental health interventions. [Research](#) from after Hurricane Katrina notes that for the majority of students, trauma generally decreased over time, particularly with access to school-based mental health supports following the disaster. But because students in low-income districts are [more likely](#) to lack access to counselors and mental health care after a disaster, states must prioritize these students and their needs.

A Call for Action

Everyone can take action to advance climate-resilient infrastructure. Here are some ideas to get you started.

State Leaders

- **Advance state-level programs and policies to support resilience, adaptation, and mitigation.** [Leaders can ensure](#) resources are directed towards weather-resilient infrastructure, comprehensive local disaster preparedness, and support systems for students and families. Leaders should identify areas of the state that are more susceptible to sudden extreme weather events and long-term exposure to other climate hazards, and prioritize communities most impacted by climate change and education inequities.
- **Support the development and implementation of local K-12 extreme weather response, adaptation and mitigation plans.** States can provide guidance, technical assistance, funding, and resources to school districts to [assess local needs and assets](#).

District and School Leaders

- **Review facilities master plans with a climate-resilience lens.** This may include selecting fire-resistant building materials, installing solar power and battery storage, [upgrading HVAC systems](#), planting trees, [creating green schoolyards](#), increasing access to shade, or other [adaptation and resilience strategies](#) based on your community's risks and needs.
- **Develop emergency response plans and safety guidelines inclusive of local extreme weather risks.** This may include [emergency response resources](#), [evacuation plans](#), [extreme heat or cold protection guidelines](#), or [indoor air quality guidance](#).

- **Prepare to support mental health before extreme weather strikes.** This may include partnering with [community-based providers](#) or training educators and school staff on [trauma-informed practices](#).
- **Determine root causes that may impact equitable access to learning-ready facilities.** Leaders can conduct self assessments, and conduct family and community surveys in multiple languages and via diverse communication methods to gather data on peoples' experiences with existing facilities, their needs, and their recommendations.

Community Members

- **Advocate for climate-resilient infrastructure.** Attend school board meetings and advocate for [healthy, climate-resilient infrastructure](#), adaptation and response plans, and mental health services in your school community. Make sure your state and other elected representatives know this is a priority.
- **Encourage youth to get involved and give them a seat at the table.** This may include volunteering during disaster response, starting or joining student action groups like the [California Youth Climate Fellowship](#), [Action for the Climate Emergency](#), [GENup](#), [Arizona Youth Climate Coalition](#), or [Climate Generation](#).

The current crisis will not be the last, and systemic change is needed to mitigate future disruptions to education and our children's futures. Students who receive the physical, social, emotional, and mental health support they need in the face of weather-related disaster will be more informed, more resilient, and more prepared for future challenges.



EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice, and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.



UndauntedK12 is a national nonprofit working to ensure that every student in our nation's public schools has the opportunity to attend a safe, healthy, and resilient school, free from the growing disruptions caused by extreme weather. We envision a day when every dollar spent on K-12 infrastructure is aligned with building an equitable, zero emissions future; when every education leader recognizes that rapidly changing climate threatens their core mission; and when every student is prepared to build a sustainable future.

Based on an EdTrust/UndauntedK12 analysis of CDE enrollment data and school closures as reported by CBS News, EdSource, LAist, Patch, The New York Times, and communications channels managed by county offices and school districts. Analysis includes public charters and nonpublic, nonsectarian schools that contract with districts to serve students with special needs. For more information about these closures, visit www.undauntedk12.org/lostlearningtime.