

After the Fires: School Counselors Respond

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Abstract

This article explores school counselors' experiences of the 2017 Sonoma Complex wildfires. Thirty-eight school counselors completed a 20-item survey exploring impact and responses to the devastating wildfires. Results detail school counselors' insights regarding post-fire responses and the impact of the fires on students, families, and school staff. Findings include the importance of open and collaborative communication, counseling support, and contextual interventions that address both instrumental and psychological needs. Implications for practice and future research are presented.

After the Fires: School Counselors Respond

“After the fires,” is a common refrain demarcating life in Sonoma County after October 8, 2017, when a series of fires broke out and merged into what is collectively known as the Sonoma Complex Fires. These wildfires razed 5,300 homes, scorched over 110,000 acres, and resulted in 24 deaths in the county. It took 23 days to extinguish the fires and regional air quality suffered, at times falling into the “hazardous” level by Environmental Protection Agency standards. Estimates for Sonoma County public schools indicated that approximately 1,450 students and 250 school employees lost homes, and two public schools were severely damaged (Sonoma County Office of Education, 2018). For a time, 260,000 students from 600 schools were out of session (Boisrond, 2017). Many schools were able to reopen shortly thereafter, but others were closed for weeks and even months. One year later, in the county’s largest district, Santa Rosa City Schools, 700 students transferred out, and the county anticipated a 1,000-student net loss as housing prices soared and families moved elsewhere (Minichiello, 2018).

In the subsequent years, California was again afflicted with devastating fires. Sonoma County schools were impacted for three consecutive years by fires, as well as associated air quality and power concerns. Local schools are now left to grapple with the potential reality that these disruptions may be part of standard school year experiences. School and youth focused post-disaster research has explored natural disasters such as wildfires (Felix et al., 2015; Miller, et al., 2012, Shepard et al., 2017; Sprague et al., 2015), floods (Bokszczanin, 2012, Martin et al., 2016), tornados (Miller et al., 2012), and hurricanes (Banks & Weems, 2014; Costa et al., 2009; Kataoka et al.,

2009). School counselors must be prepared to face the aftermath of wildfires and other natural disasters, given the high probability that they may at some point face these issues in their work (Shepard et al., 2017).

Schools are neighborhood centers in the aftermath of disasters, meeting the physical, social, and psychological needs for the school and extended community (Brock et al., 2013; Mutch, 2016). As integral members of the school team, school counselors serve on the front lines. In these situations, school counselors attend to their constituents by helping students and the larger community cope, re-establish a sense of safety, and pick up the pieces in the aftermath. Yet, during disasters, school personnel are often being impacted themselves (Felix et al., 2010; Mutch, 2015).

Despite the important role that schools play post-disaster, there is a dearth of information related to insights gained by school personnel, as well as a need to integrate such information into comprehensive post-disaster planning (Mutch, 2015). The current study examines school counselors' experiences of the 2017 wildfires on themselves and the members of their school community. The study examined two domains: (1) post fire responses and (2) impact on students, families, and the counselors themselves. Emerging themes provide insights for post-disaster school counseling practice.

Method

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Sonoma State University. Participants were recruited via a Facebook group established after the fires. Because this social media group grew to contain individuals in helping professions other than school counseling, the call for participants included a specific request for only

school counselors to respond. In addition, targeted emails were sent to area school counselors who were not in this social media group. Because all notifications encouraged potential participants to share the link with their colleagues, there is no way to be certain precisely how many school counselors received the invitation, although a best approximation is roughly 150.

Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of 20 questions in varied format (multiple/forced-choice, scale, open ended) (see Appendix A). Content areas were initially created based on discussion in a post-fire support group meeting for local school counselors. After a preliminary survey draft was created, support group participants and other constituents provided feedback via email. Unclear or ambiguous questions were clarified. Feedback included concerns about the large number of open-ended questions, given its potential impact on response rate. However, in many cases, the uniqueness of the experience made it difficult to narrow the questions down to a closed format. The researcher also wanted to create opportunity for school counselors to share their personal experiences fully without limiting their options. The final survey included 12 open-ended questions, 2 Likert-type questions, and 6 forced-choice questions. The final survey was administered online via Qualtrics and took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Participants

Fifty-two people completed the consent form and 38 completed the survey. Most of the respondents (45%) were high school counselors, followed by middle school (32%) and elementary school (24%). The schools ranged in size from 60 to 3,500.

Sonoma County had the most respondents (78%), and the remaining were from Napa County.

Data Analysis

Open-ended questions were thematically analyzed using the steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Both co-authors reviewed the data independently and identified patterned responses. The focus was on exploring the entire data using a semantic approach that drew on explicit or surface meanings. The co-authors then met to review the identified themes, with a resulting strong level of agreement (90%). Discrepancies were discussed and consensus reached. Because a key goal was to uncover potential responses to a novel situation, all open-ended responses were thoroughly considered. Thus, some single respondent comments are included in the results section.

Results

Impact on the School

A majority of responding school counselors noted some degree of impact on their school, with 33% assessed as “very impacted” and 47% as “somewhat impacted.” Offered a choice of type of impact, a vast majority of school counselors (83.3%) reported evacuations of students and staff (identical percentage for both groups). Most schools (79%) were closed over 1 week, with 9% closed 1 week. The remainder were closed between 1-4 days. School sites were also impacted by members of their communities losing homes. Sixty-seven percent of school counselors reported students losing homes and 69% indicated that school staff lost homes. Displacement impacted schools by both attrition of students (28%) and enrollment of displaced students (36%).

When offered an opportunity to elaborate on their perceptions of impact on their school, stress and anxiety came up frequently. Heightened stress and anxiety among students and staff were manifest by fatigue, lack of focus, hypervigilance (e.g., triggers including smoke, sirens). Articulated stressors included missed work, lost income, loss of family members' homes, difficulty finding places to live, managing displaced students, and coping with change and loss. Extended school closures created the stress of making up for lost time. Several school counselors noted that these stressors were compounded for students with prior traumas. In some cases, entire communities experienced evacuations. In addition to stress and anxiety, some of the respondents also noted the health impact of compromised air quality and issues related to closure and cleanup.

Decision Making

Nearly all school counselors expressed a belief that the decision-making process about when to reopen the schools was done effectively (94%). For the most part these decisions were made by the administration and district level personnel. The difficulty containing the fires necessitated a "one day at a time" approach and an ongoing, protracted period of decision making. Collaboration was reportedly at the heart of this process. This included collaboration among district personnel with entities such as Cal Fire and other first responders, superintendents conferring amongst themselves, and the involvement of the County Office of Education and the County Board of Education. Some school administrators took the steps of conferring with counselors and assessing needs and impact by holding staff meetings or surveying community members.

Lifting of evacuation orders represented the first step in moving forward but concerns about safety persisted. Responses indicate that safety considerations were paramount throughout, with air quality being the most often noted issue. Maintenance crews played a key role in the decision-making process, particularly regarding progress toward changing air filters and general clean up. Power and cell phone access also presented obstacles. In addition, given the breadth of impact across the entire community, some schools took into consideration the readiness of staff (many of whom were coping with evacuation and loss) to return to work. Finally, those school sites that were functioning as shelters needed to contend with placement of evacuees and clean-up of the shelter site. Districts were also reported to have undertaken facility-related steps to smooth the transition back, including deep cleaning/changing air filters and general clean-up of sites that were evacuation sites.

Helpful Responses

Counseling Support. Provision of extra counseling support by both the district and county came up frequently when school counselors shared their thoughts about which interventions were most helpful. As one respondent stated, when school counselor ratios are already taxing, adding on the additional needs after such a traumatic event is untenable. Extra counseling support took a variety of forms. In some instances, this meant additional counseling staff on site. In others, the counseling services were more specific, such as one school that established a one-week trauma center in the library staffed by counselors and therapy dogs.

Counseling support extended beyond just services to students to include support for the counselors and teachers as well. School counselors placed high value on having

a chance to process experiences together, planning the return to school, coordinating the response, acknowledging the personal impact that staff were experiencing, and training related to trauma and resilience. Many responses centered on the theme of giving things time, being flexible, and slowing down, while providing opportunities to express feelings, build community, and decrease the focus on academics. Several respondents noted feeling empowered by the County Office of Education trainings, which created a sense of (in the words of one respondent), “we got this.” Trauma training with support materials for working with staff proved very helpful. The County Office of Education also provided Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) and Bounce Back training.

While counseling support was generally appreciated, respondents did note some complicating issues. For example, some counselors reported that eagerness to return to “normal” in the first days and weeks meant that the additional counseling services were not optimally used. These services might have been more beneficial if offered at a later time, as lingering anxiety and aftereffects came to the forefront. The delayed impact and need for ongoing support were noted by a number of school counselors who described having a “flood of counselors from other areas” show up, without the awareness of school personnel. Also, some inconsistency and instability were reported when outside counseling entities worked to provide counseling in the schools. One respondent suggested a monetary fund as a viable alternative for more tailored support for displaced students, staff, and families. At a minimum, careful attention to coordination and consistency was deemed essential.

Collaboration/Consultation. Another popular response concerned staff preparation and meetings, particularly collaborating with administration and crisis teams. School counselors voiced appreciation for 1-2 days without students for processing and preparation, and as well as general emotional support among the school personnel.

Consultation among multiple elements of the educational and fire response system took a central role in effective responses. This included the support of and coordination with the district, county, and emergency personnel. Consultation with staff, either in person or by other means (emails, surveys) was also mentioned as very important, to hear concerns that needed to be incorporated into the plan moving forward. Such consultation allowed school counselors to formulate meaningful in-service training prior to re-opening. Some in-service training foci included: what to expect for students and themselves, informal lunch discussions, relaxation exercises, or social emotional learning information. Some respondents noted redundancy between site and county training and noted the value of processing these experiences within their own site group.

Communication. Clear, consistent communication was also viewed as important. School counselors appreciated district administration leaving lines of communication open by phone, email, or other means. Districts provided support by working with school personnel to create talking points, school-wide messages, and an agenda for the return days. After the messages were crafted at the district level, sites could determine how specifically to share the information with their own constituents. In

crafting a site-level response, taking time to talk with counselors and hold faculty meetings were essential.

School counselors were asked about methods of communication among school, home, and community. Phone calls and emails were the predominant methods of communication. A few schools used texts, social media, or their district website. Law enforcement alerts and local newspaper and radio were also used. Regarding phone calls, group messages were most common, although some schools took the step of placing personal calls to each home. Respondents shared various methods for dividing up this large workload. One example was to have advisory class teachers call their students' families to assess impact. Another site described a parent/student assembly prior to re-opening, followed by a student assembly after return to school. In another instance, the principal and a teacher used Google Maps to target personal calls and followed up by designating one site contact for those who had lost homes.

Assessing Needs. Identifying impacted students and assessing student/family needs was highly valued by school counselors. This created opportunities for interventions targeted to specific hardships. Such steps enabled schools to provide concrete resources and hasten a return to normalcy.

Commonly reported issues included replacing supplies and books, altering bus routes for displaced students, and mobilizing community partnerships. Those who made personal phone calls expressed a belief that the calls were well worth the time and effort. Establishing a clear system of support was also highly valued. In one instance, site counselors met with displaced families for an assessment interview and offered resources. The office manager compiled information from these meetings and passed it

on to the homeless/foster liaison, who could be the point person for additional follow up. One beneficial step involved providing a *marker* that identified impacted students in the student information system. Family outreach represented a big part of these efforts. In some schools, counselors called families and in others faculty divided up the calls. Another strategy included holding a family meeting night before reopening, with resources such as food, donations, and counseling referrals available.

Issues and Challenges

Language was an issue and the importance of multilingual communications that reflected the community languages was mentioned. It is important to note that loss of power for an extended period impacted whether individuals received messages and emails. One respondent noted the stress and uncertainty created when they did not have information on the schedule for the first day without students, and another reported the need to show sensitivity to issues of displaced teachers.

School counselors expressed mixed feelings regarding donations. The volume and poor quality of many donations could create more burden than help. Cash and gift cards were more effective because they allowed students, families, and schools to get what they needed. This fit with an overall theme of tailoring interventions to a given situation, which proved more useful than generic disaster response.

A key theme that emerged was to keep things simple and avoid the urge to overdo. Too many handouts, meetings, strategies, and resources were cited as being overwhelming, and thus unhelpful. School counselors reported that many individuals craved normalcy. Having a united, clear, simple messages was most beneficial. Some noted the importance of avoiding a rush to go back to school and reported the value in

taking the time needed for the faculty to be ready emotionally and for the buildings to be prepared physically (e.g., changing air filters).

Challenges included working with teachers who minimized or dismissed the impact of the fire-related experiences, information leaks that made sites seem ill informed, and elementary schools feeling left behind/on their own. There was also mention of the burden placed on school staff when their school served as an evacuation site.

Needs of Students and Families

Respondents shared their thoughts about the needs of students immediately after the fires, including psychological, instrumental, social, and other hardships. One of the most common issues was a heightened level of anxiety for many students, and the need for emotional support and a sense of normalcy upon their return to school. Psychological impacts were revealed a few weeks after schools reopened, and instrumental needs like shelter and clothing took precedent in the beginning. A few respondents mentioned anxiety and fear being more prevalent in students who were evacuated but did not lose homes. The fear of what could have happened affected some students more than the trauma of what actually *did* happen. Many respondents noted an overall sense of trauma being present in the immediate aftermath, and the effects were long lasting. Many schools held off on returning to their regular academic calendars, and instead let the students take part in projects and discussion circles with their teachers and peers. Everyone had a story that needed to be told; it was part of the healing process, and many schools did what they could to make sure that need was met.

School counselors highlighted instrumental needs as most critical for families. Thirty-six percent reported that their students' families struggled to secure housing immediately after the fires. Provision of school supplies ranked high among instrumental needs. Students who lost homes needed everything replaced and school supplies were an important step in their transition back into academics. Many respondents said money was helpful to the families, more so than physical donations. Financial donations allowed for more tailored acquisition of needed items.

Families also had psychological needs. There was a theme of parents overlooking the importance of adequate emotional support for themselves and school counselors recognized the positive correlation between parental mental health and child well-being. For example, several respondents described how parents became hypervigilant about checking in on their children while they were at school. There was a general need for a sense of safety. Parents needed extra resources to help reassure themselves and their kids to ease anxiety. One respondent suggested weekly or even monthly community meetings where parents could receive ongoing support, and another advocated for parent support groups.

Impact on School Counselors

School counselors themselves lived and worked through stressful experiences. Respondents were asked about the level of stress they experienced professionally because of the fires. Over 90% reported fire-related stress, with 52% describing feeling very stressed by the fires and 42% considering themselves somewhat stressed. Almost all reported seeing smoke (97%), and a majority inhaled smoke (87%) and saw flames

(68%). Roughly 52% reported having to move temporarily and 19% lost a home or property to the fires.

Eighty-one percent expressed a belief that fire-related stress impacted their work. Sources of stress included anxiety about meeting the emotional demands of students and colleagues. Disruption of routines exacerbated existing learning and behavioral issues of students. School counselors were also coping with fire-related disruption in their own lives, such as housing-displaced individuals, coping with their own children's school closures, taking in friends' pets, and supporting relatives in the emergency response professions. Others struggled with the general feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty that the fires produced. One school counselor described "just the sight of an orange sky (which is usually a pretty sight) or smell of smoke brings back those memories." Another stated "having grown up here, every person I knew was impacted – childhood homes we had all grown up in. On the one hand it made me incredibly compassionate, but I was definitely fatigued and over saturated. I found some solace in being a professional during this time and being in service to others."

The resilience and generosity of the community was inspirational, and many school counselors volunteered to help in their community in addition to their efforts for their schools. As one respondent described "We never had an opportunity to process our own experiences. I believe I have been suffering from secondary trauma due to having to help everyone else manage, process and regulate emotions." And another indicated "I feel like I was the one person at my site who kept it together and provided support for staff and students. Once we settled into our temporary campus sites and I was able to relax, I felt overwhelmed and stressed."

Discussion

Not surprisingly, survey data clearly indicated that the wildfires had a tremendous impact on the schools and their constituents, and that school counselors were on the front lines in helping their communities cope with these tragic events. Evacuations, displacement, school closures, loss of homes, etc. impacted the academic and social-emotional lives of students in profound ways. The wildfires shaped the context of students' lives (e.g., home, family, school, and extended community), creating both challenges and opportunities to foster resilience. School counselors reported that the educational systems in their communities responded to the crisis in an effective manner. As stressful and uncertain as things were, overall decision-making went smoothly, drawing on collaboration with the multiple constituents involved. Indeed, close collaboration and consultation stood out as a hallmark of effective decision-making. Understandably, the uncertainty of the wildfires meant that there were many moving parts to coordinate, requiring a one-day-at-a-time approach. School counselors expressed appreciation for clear communication and direction and learned the importance of having multiple avenues for communication due to the impact of factors such as power loss.

School counselors described communities coming together to create a web of support and drew some recommendations that might optimize responses to future similar events. "Keep it simple" appeared as a theme, as a caution that the desire to help may lead to overdoing or engaging in *helpful* behavior that ends up inadvertently becoming a stressor. Respondents highlighted the benefit of slowing down, being flexible and taking the time to think and assess. School counselors expressed that it

was worth the extra effort to personalize outreach to identify and support impacted students and their families.

A valued intervention that was repeatedly mentioned was the provision of extra counselor support, although school counselors offered some insights into how to optimize these services. Many mentioned that counselors and staff needed time to process together before students returned. The well-being of school personnel was impacted by the fires and thus attending to their emotional needs was vital in making sure they were ready to support students. Also, school counselors noted the need for ongoing, not just short term, support due to the often-delayed impact of stressors. A review of post-wildfire recommendations indicates that mental health and emotional support services may be needed up to 2 years post-disaster (Rural Wildfire Study Group, 2013, pp. 25-26). Also, respondents expressed the need to organize and coordinate outside entities for smooth and consistent delivery of counseling services.

The wildfires were a stressful and anxiety producing experience for students, families, and staff. Initially, attention to instrumental needs took the forefront, with psychological impact manifesting later. It seems that people first sought normalcy after the chaos of the active wildfire experience, replicating findings from other wildfire research (Shepard et al., 2017). Over time, stress, anxiety, and loss emerged as key themes, and these issues were prevalent for all constituents. This is particularly meaningful from a counseling perspective because of the dynamic, interconnected nature of adult well-being and student outcomes. In other words, student resilience in the aftermath of disaster is tied to the contextual support they receive (Banks & Weems, 2014; Bokszczanin, 2012; Weems & Overstreet, 2008). Schools function as part of this

contextual support web, helping to establish a sense of normalcy, safety, and connection (Shepard et al., 2017).

Respondents also mentioned the need to attend to family support, a sentiment mirrored in prior research (Felix, et al., 2015). As with other wildfire disasters, parental emotional support has a strong influence on the coping skills of young people (Baggerly & Exum, 2008; Shepard et al., 2017; Sprague et al., 2015). Yet, parents may misjudge the effect of their own stress on their family (Felix et al., 2015). In the present study, school counselors repeatedly mentioned the importance of parents, teachers, and counselors taking time to help themselves in order to best help students. A key theme related to the benefit of school personnel taking the time to process their own experiences before students returned. This service was often facilitated by school counselors.

Finally, it is important to note that the school counselors who responded to this survey lived in the impacted community, and thus were subjected to the stress and disruption wrought by the wildfires both personally and professionally. Yet, as cornerstones of support for the school community, they typically did not have time to stop and consider their own needs. This finding is in keeping with previous research that highlights the importance of attending to burnout and compassion fatigue in counselors (Kataoka et al., 2009; Shepard et al., 2017). It is essential that post-disaster response plans include established infrastructure of counselor support measures as an ingredient to bolster their ability to provide care for others.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study offers a unique glimpse into school counselors' experiences after a wildfire event devastated their communities. Sadly, these types of tragic disasters are likely to become more common. In the period since the wildfires addressed in this study, several other massive wildfires have brought widespread havoc and destruction in other communities. This study offers some useful information for school counselors to draw on to prepare for and cope with such events in the future.

The study is limited primarily in its sampling method. The use of social media to share the survey makes it impossible to know how many school counselors the survey reached and thus the response rate was unknown. The project grew out of a grassroots community effort to respond to a disaster few could have anticipated. The results have been shared with constituents in the school counseling community and found to be reflective of their experiences.

Directions for Future Research

This study provides an understanding of the issues that school counselors face in the aftermath of a large and devastating wildfire. The findings provide a foundation for future research including how to optimize counseling services and methods to work with families. The latter is important given that wildfires affect not only the school, but the larger contexts of children's lives. In addition, attention should also be focused on the impact that large-scale disasters have on school counselors. It is important to help them avoid secondary traumatization and to cope with the toll of being a caregiver to so many, while also going through their own experience of the event. Survey responses provide a limited range of information. Consequently, for situations as complex as

wildfires, future research that employs qualitative methods, including interviews, may better capture the experience of those involved.

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APPENDIX A

After the Fires Questionnaire

1. What is your school level? (elementary, middle, high)
2. Number of students at your school site?
3. What is your county? (Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino)
4. On a scale of 1 (not impacted) to 10 (extremely impacted) how would you assess the level of impact on your school?
5. What was the type of impact experienced by your school community? Check all that apply.
 - a. Physical damage to school
 - b. Loss of homes (student)
 - c. Loss of homes (teachers/staff)
 - d. Evacuation (students)
 - e. Evacuations (teachers/staff)
 - f. Taking in displaced students
 - g. Loss of students due to displacement
6. Please share any other comments you have about the impact on your school.
7. How many days was your school closed?
 - a. None
 - b. 1-2 days
 - c. 3-4 days
 - d. One week
 - e. More than one week
8. Please describe, to the best of your knowledge, how decisions were made regarding when school would re-open?
9. In your opinion, was this process done effectively? (yes, no, unsure)

10. What did your county office of education do to address the situation/prepare for re-opening? Please specifically address what you found helpful/unhelpful.
11. What did your district do to address the situation/prepare for re-opening? Please specifically address what you found helpful/unhelpful.
12. How were school/home and school/community communications handled? Please specifically address what you found helpful/unhelpful.
13. In your opinion, what were the things that really helped? What would you do again?
14. In your opinion, what were things that were not effective/useful?
15. On a scale of 1 (not stressful) to 10 (extremely stressful) how would you assess the level of stress you experienced professionally as a result of the fires?
16. What was your personal exposure during the fires?
 - a. Did you see flames?
 - b. Did you see smoke?
 - c. Did you inhale smoke?
 - d. Did you lose a home or other property?
 - e. Did you have to move temporarily (at any point)?
17. Do you feel that fire-related stress impacted your work as a school counselor?
How?
18. For students, what were the key psychological needs (trauma, sense of safety and security, anxiety), instrumental needs (shelter, food, clothing, school supplies), social needs, or other types of needs? Please give examples.
19. For teachers, what were the key psychological needs (trauma, sense of safety and security, anxiety), instrumental needs (shelter, food, clothing, school supplies), social needs, or other types of needs? Please give examples.
20. For students, what were the key psychological needs (trauma, sense of safety and security, anxiety), instrumental needs (shelter, food, clothing, school supplies), social needs, or other types of needs? Please give examples.