

Hurricane Ike K-12 Case Study



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HURRICANE IKE IMPACT REPORT

K-12 CASE STUDY - School District Proves Vital in Reestablishing Community

Storm History

2005 - Hurricane Rita

2007 - Hurricane
Humberto

2008 - Hurricane
Gustav

2008 - Hurricane Ike

Bridge City, Texas is located in southern Orange County near the Texas-Louisiana border. It is a self-proclaimed “bed-room community” surrounded on three sides by water with a population of under 10,000, making it an ideal escape for fishermen, bird watchers and water sport enthusiasts. Bridge City has faced many of Texas’ worst hurricanes. In 2005 it withstood Rita; in 2007 the only death associated with Humberto occurred in Bridge City; and on August 25, 2008, the town experienced severe flooding as a result of Gustav.

Case Facts

On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike made landfall on the upper Texas Coast, just as residents were recovering from Gustav. While Ike’s winds were strong, it was the storm surge that left Bridge City with only twenty-four of its 3,400 homes habitable and every business either damaged or destroyed. Bridge City ISD felt the brunt of Ike as well, with every school but the high school inundated, the worst of which with four feet of standing water. Two elementary schools would be unsalvageable and would eventually cost \$19 million to replace. Nine days into the school year, the disaster left Bridge City’s 2,550 students totally displaced.



Key Decisions

Superintendent Jamey Harrison returned to Bridge City with two other school district officials before the storm had even subsided. They quickly determined that reopening the schools in Bridge City before parents enrolled their children in other districts was crucial to bringing residents back to the community. District officials evaluated the remaining

facilities and set the deadline to reopen the schools for October 6—giving them just three weeks.

In the first ten days following Ike, Bridge City community and school district officials worked tirelessly, often in nineteen hour shifts, to prepare the campuses for students. At the start of their efforts to restore the schools, administrators were homeless themselves. They soon purchased RVs to live in for the duration of the project. In fact, most of the city personnel were homeless due to the hurricane. Nearly all of the town's fifty firefighters lost their homes, and many camped out at the fire station. The mayor moved into the courthouse. Bridge City High School would become the main hub for FEMA operations and community life during this time of rebuilding, the place where food was prepared and operations were directed. In this way, life in Bridge City following the storm was truly dependent on its schools.

2,550 students Bridge City students were displaced by Ike,

2,370 students were in attendance on the day Bridge City schools reopened their doors.

In fact, the push to reopen schools in Bridge City became a uniting factor within the surrounding area in addition to Bridge City itself. This was apparent when mid-way through the repair process news came that temporary housing would not be in place by the time the district reopened. The issue of how to transport students from their temporary homes in surrounding counties, some as far as forty-five minutes away, was addressed by district officials with the aid of local media.

Student pick-up and drop-off sites were designated in central locations of nearby communities such as the Wal-Mart in Port Arthur and the Home Depot in Orange. The local media and the district web site were crucial to getting the information to parents that the schools were reopening and how transportation to and from school had been

arranged. Superintendent Harrison also worked with the local phone company to organize a phone bank for parents to improve communication about bus pick-up and drop-off locations and other details about the students. Secretaries and teachers worked the phone lines and helped create a system in which some students were driven an hour each way, passing through three school districts on their way to their classrooms. The effort to get Bridge City children back into Bridge City schools seemed to touch everyone from the largest of retailers to the most discouraged of residents.



However, bringing the students back was only half the fight. Superintendent Harrison wanted campuses that would provide a new, solid, safe and orderly environment for children already facing a great deal of tumult in their lives due to the storm and subsequent displacement. It would be unacceptable for families to return with their children only to find substandard or improper buildings. The decision was made to merge the two irreparably damaged elementary school campuses. Superintendent Harrison outlined his needs to three modular facility companies. The company that could meet his deadline began construction.

\$19 million in damages to the school district.

Insurance covered \$3 million,

FEMA provided \$10 million and

Texas Legislature provided \$8.5 million

Conclusions

Today, the high school, intermediate and middle school are fully repaired. The combined elementary campus consists of twenty-five modular classroom buildings and twelve ancillary buildings which also house the district offices.

The \$19 million in funding needed for the repairs and construction of the new campus came from multiple sources. Insurance was the smallest portion, covering only \$3 million. After four applications for assistance, FEMA approved \$10 million. The district was still short \$6 million in necessary funds to replace the elementary schools. Raising the money

through property taxes was not a possibility due to declining property values. Superintendent Harrison turned to the state for assistance. He testified before legislature multiple times. Eventually, Bridge City ISD received \$8.5 million and began building its new school.

The day Bridge City ISD reopened its doors, 92% of the district's original enrollment, or 2,370 students, returned. As of 2010, they have surpassed pre-Ike enrollment.

