Editor Note: Almost a year ago, school officials in San Diego were dealing with more than test scores and budgets—they literally were trying to save their schools as wildfires threatened to demolish them. The following article, published in the November 12, 2007 issue of California School Business News, published by the California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) illustrates the many roles school business officials play outside the finance office—as educators and community members.

Many CASBO members and their districts throughout Southern California were called into action during the recent wildfires, putting established emergency plans to the test and revealing the many ways the school industry is called upon when disaster strikes.

“I’ve seen it a few times now where terrible things happen and the folks that work in our schools really step up,” said Jim Esterbrooks, public information officer for the San Diego County Office of Education and an institutional member of CASBO. “In the wake of fires, shootings, and other unimaginable things, people are looking for places to turn and the school folks step up every time,” he said.

During the fires and their aftermath, CASBO members were asked to “step up” in a variety of ways, from managing evacuation centers at school sites to providing school buses to transport the elderly from care centers in harm’s way. “That was an early call; if you are not using your buses, we need them,” Esterbrooks said.

Throughout the crisis, CASBO members performed tasks from the basic to the high-tech, and from the professional to the highly personal. In looking back on the week of the
crisis, most found their emergency planning had prepared them for nearly every scenario they faced; but there were a few surprises along the way.

Called to Serve

The 42 school districts in San Diego County were particularly hard hit by the assorted fires, with individual districts being called to serve in a variety of ways during the week.

Many districts implemented electronic parent notification systems, often several times a day, to blast out phone messages on the status of schools, according to Eric Dill, executive director, business services with the San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD) and the chair of CASBO’s Risk Management R&D Committee for the San Diego/Imperial Section.

The notification system was used to clarify school closures and potential re-opening dates, and to provide reassuring messages about the clean up and safety of individual school sites. The messages were sent out multiple times and in multiple languages, Dill said.

Using the notification system, the district was able to contact 30,000 phone numbers in 20 minutes, an option that was not available four years ago when fires struck the area. “In trying to get the message out back then, it was basically rumor control. We were able to stay out in front of the rumors this time. We were putting out our message to the community and the message was authoritative,” Dill said.

SDUHSD also activated its district-office level emergency systems in order for staff to stay in touch with each other using previously established lines of communication, and eliminating a repetitive barrage of calls for emergency teams.

In the area of business continuity planning, Dill said SDUHSD initiated a matching system, and later used a phone survey to determine staffing levels when schools re-opened the week following the fires.

As San Diego County released addresses and neighborhoods where homes were burned, that data was matched against employee address data to give the district an indication of who would likely be returning to work, and who was impacted for the long term, Dill said. A phone call also went out to all staff members which directed them to press phone buttons to indicate their status: press one if you are fine, two if you are temporarily impacted, and three if you will be impacted long-term.

“With that message, we were able to account for 800 of 1,100 employees. We were able to find out that about 90% were fine by Thursday so that we could do our planning on Friday morning,” said Dill.

A portion of a high school campus in Murrieta Valley Unified School District (MVUSD) became an evacuation center during the fires due to quick action by district officials. As nearby store parking lots began to fill up with vehicles and people fleeing the San Diego fires, John Preston, director of risk management for MVUSD and chair of CASBO’s state Risk Management R&D Committee, began

the process of designating one of the district’s high school campuses as a Red Cross evacuation center.

“They didn’t come to us, we communicated with them,” Preston said. “We said ‘Let’s jump ahead of this and be ready with extra security and planning.’ This allowed for a forward planning mode rather than a crisis mode.”

Since school was still in session at the site, taking a proactive approach gave Preston time to make provisions for additional staff, security, and custodians to protect students and assist at the portion of the school designated as an evacuation site.

Communication, Technology Were Key

Throughout the week of wildfires, the San Diego County Office of Education took on the role of communications manager for its districts, personnel, students and their families, and the media. Keeping all stakeholders up to date required the use of both modern and old-fashioned communication techniques.

The county office’s Website home page was updated regularly to aid all groups that are impacted when schools are shuttered for several days. Website additions included information about home learning activities, details from the California Department of Education on what schools could do to get disaster relief, information on damage levels to individual San Diego County schools, protocols for cleaning up school sites, and school closures and estimated re-opening dates.

Internet links on the site connected students and staff to area mental health resources and air pollution control information. Media outlets could visit the site for the latest, most accurate details. “There was a lot of misinformation flying around and we tried to correct it before it went on the air,” Esterbrooks said.

Yet in the age of constant connection through computers and mobile phones, the fires did interrupt the use of technology at times. Superintendents who had been evacuated from their offices or homes were not always reachable by mobile phone or established land lines. “We found ourselves out of touch a few times but we just kept after them, or they would find another way of communicating,” Esterbrooks said.

And communicate they did. Conference calls were held each day with all 42 San Diego County superintendents. “The first question each time was ‘Are you OK?’” Esterbrooks said. “The daily communication with the superintendents was a positive thing at a couple of levels. They could say ‘This is what we need,’ or ‘This is my question and I need an answer right away.’” Esterbrooks added. “On a personal level, the voices of their peers and offers of support meant a lot to sustain their efforts and energy.”

Lessons Learned

In most cases, emergency operations plans worked well for school districts whether they were impacted by fire, evacuations or poor air quality.

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“There were no big ‘ahha’ moments,” Dill said. But SDUHSD did find one issue it plans to address. While student contact information is updated regularly, employee contact information may not be as reliably accurate. In an area where some area codes had changed as many as three times, “there were a good number of people who had never updated their information and they weren’t getting the messages,” said Dill.

Another thing to keep in mind during a crisis, according to Preston at Murrieta Valley Unified, is that the normal business day quickly deteriorates when response to the crisis takes first priority. “That’s all you do that day. Your normal business day doesn’t exist,” Preston said.

His district also was faced with significant substitute teacher needs than usual when staff members living in the San Diego area were unable to commute to work or had suffered losses in the fires.

Experience with prior fires in the Santa Barbara area contributed to at least one change to Vern Sanborn’s emergency plan for his staff at the Santa Barbara County Office of Education. While Sanborn, safety manager for SBCOE and the assistant chair of CASBO’s Risk Management R&D Committee, did not have to evacuate during the recent fires, a previous wildfire led him to create a system for gathering important documents during an emergency.

“One important documents weren’t really available to pick up and go. Now paper copies of important documents are kept in color-coded binders so they are easy to grab,” he said.

Payroll information must also be protected, Sanborn said, leading him to suggest that an electronic backup of payroll documentation be stored off site in case of emergency.

The Next Step
The closure of schools for more than a week impacted school districts on many levels, and while questions still remain concerning funding for the emergency response, some assurances have already been given.

For example, school facilities will not lose Average Daily Attendance funding if they were used as community shelters or were forced to close because of the wildfires under provisions in the state Education Code and with the assistance of State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell.

Also, the board of directors of the Southern California Regional Liability Excess Fund, a California joint powers agency, recently declared $1.95 million of surplus equity and authorized its release to its self-insured members to assist in disaster recovery efforts. Additional information on the program is available at www.socalrelief.org.

Information for districts impacted by the fires is also available at the California Department of Education Website, www.cde.ca.gov.

The Southern California fires should serve as a reminder of the importance of emergency planning, according to Jeannie Goobanoff, loss prevention director for Redwood Empire Schools Insurance Group and chair of CASBO’s Council on Professional Development.

A recent fire in Goobanoff’s home county that nearly destroyed a single school meant several missed school days, concerns about rebuilding and the loss of electronic records that had not been backed up. “It underscores the importance of having a good emergency operations plan and solid business continuity plans,” Goobanoff said. “After any type of disaster, good planning will help schools recover and get back to the business of educating the kids, which is what we are here to do.”

Although the fires are now under control, the work for CASBO members and their districts may not yet be contained. “It’s not over, of course,” Esterbrooks said. “Legislation is going to be needed to make sure costs are met.”

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