

Schools and community work together to overcome Irma



Todd Bowden

I am always thankful to be living and working in Sarasota County, but I've never felt this more deeply than in the period before, during and immediately after Hurricane Irma.

As the storm approached, we watched the dire forecasts and worried about our families, homes and businesses. Many people traveled elsewhere seeking safety. Others sought refuge in local shelters.

I'm proud to say that 14 of our public schools served as shelters for our citizens and those from other Florida counties and beyond. All told, we hosted almost 19,000 evacuees in our schools. From babies to seniors — and even family pets in designated shelters — we welcomed them all.

While Sarasota County was largely spared the destruction that affected many other areas of Florida, we have experienced evacuations,

power outages and debris in streets and yards. Yet most of us came through the storm stronger than we were before. I am most impressed by the way we pulled together in the true spirit of neighbors helping neighbors.

Emails, calls and letters to the editor on these pages thanked our principals and employees who spent sleepless nights making sure people felt as safe and comfortable as possible. When a generator broke down in a shelter for people with special needs, staff members ventured out in the storm and brought a generator from the soccer field inside for guests who needed oxygen tanks to breathe. School bus drivers picked people up in evacuation zones and brought them to shelters. Food service employees provided thousands of meals to shelter guests.

After the storm, our custodial and maintenance staff cleaned classrooms and removed debris on campuses so schools would be ready to reopen. All Faiths Food Bank used schools and other locations to provide emergency food for families who

were without power or had experienced other setbacks.

But this is not just a story of school district staff contributing to public safety. We could not have served our citizens without linking arms with our many community partners. I'd like to thank Sarasota County Emergency Management, the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County, the National Guard, police departments, firefighters and EMTs, and the many foundations and individual donors who provided funding for the recovery.

After the storm, some of our employees gathered to share their shelter stories. The common thread was that the impact of this potentially devastating hurricane was surprisingly positive. Administrators, teachers, support staff and volunteers will be talking for years about their experiences working at the shelters and the friendships they formed with people brought together by circumstance. We are reviewing lessons learned from Irma — what went well and how we can improve the next time a storm threatens our area.

Our 43,300 students returned to school Sept. 18, having missed six days of instruction. The state has waived the need to make up two of the six days of instruction we lost due to Hurricane Irma. We had to decide how and when to make up the four remaining school days.

Because Sarasota County citizens value public education, voters have passed a referendum for additional school funding every four years since 2002. This funding is a key reason why we remain one of only two school districts to have received an A grade from the Florida Department of Education every year since district grading began 14 years ago. These dollars provide, among other things, an extra 30 minutes of instruction a day for all our students.

I considered using two school days we had already set aside as possible "makeup days" in our school calendar — the day before Thanksgiving and the day before Memorial Day weekend — but I knew so many students would be absent that those days would not be valuable as instructional time. The state

requires either 180 instructional days or the equivalent in instructional hours.

I decided the most feasible approach was to take a small portion of the teaching minutes made possible by the referendum and convert them to four makeup days. School Board members agreed with this option at their Sept. 19 meeting.

While this decision means our district will not have to make up four school days, our students will still have far more hours of instruction in 2017-18 than the state requires — the equivalent in minutes of 14 extra days of teaching.

Our schools serve critical emergency functions during a crisis, but our fundamental mission remains the same — positively impacting every student, every day. That will never change.

We are fortunate to live in a county that supports public education in so many ways. We are also blessed to be part of a community of caring citizens who work together in times of need.

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