District Description

At the end of August 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought serious flooding to the Pascagoula School District on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Pascagoula became better known throughout the nation than it had been before the storm, but the tragic experiences of the city, its school district, and its families were overshadowed in the daily news by what was happening in New Orleans. Most of the houses and buildings in Pascagoula were damaged, and the entire gulf region east of Pascagoula to Mobile, Alabama, and west through Mississippi and on to New Orleans, suffered major damage from the huge storm and flooding.

The Pascagoula schools were closed for more than a month, businesses were closed, and ship-building, the major industry and employer, came to a halt.

Key Findings

- Due to Hurricane Katrina, this is not a normal school year for the Pascagoula School District. Instruction and testing continue, however, and the district is trying to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act for academic achievement and adequate yearly progress. The greatest challenge has been with teacher quality, as the district found it necessary to place teachers in classrooms when schools reopened even if they did not meet the requirements.

- Pascagoula fits the federal definition of a “major disaster area,” so the district can take advantage of the U.S. Department of Education’s NCLB flexibility, including an extended deadline to meet requirements for “highly qualified” teachers. The district expects to receive accountability information in July; until then officials cannot predict what specific needs will be. Among the many challenges will be keeping highly qualified teachers and recruiting new teachers. In addition to the difficulty of teaching in classrooms that do not even meet pre-hurricane standards, housing and living conditions in the area have been seriously disrupted. Even so, the district must find ways to lure highly qualified teachers to Pascagoula.

- The costs of restoring educational facilities and services in the Pascagoula school district are enormous, with estimates exceeding $35 million. The costs of rebuilding the two schools that were destroyed have not yet been determined. The district expects to receive funding from three new federal grant programs to help school districts educate students displaced by Katrina. As of the end of February 2006, the only federal relief funds the district had actually received were Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) restoration clean-up funds.
The subgroup of students with disabilities at one middle school has not made AYP for the past two years. In 2004 the reading/language arts target was not met, and in 2005, the math target was not met. However, the school is not in improvement because schools in Mississippi must miss AYP targets in the same content area for two years before being identified for improvement. If public school choice had been required in 2005-06, it likely would not have been much of an issue due to the efforts of displaced families to get their children enrolled wherever there was room.

Impact of Hurricane Katrina

Pascagoula families were accustomed to hurricanes and high winds, and they knew from past experiences how to board up their windows and sit out the storms, but 2005 was different. Superintendent Wayne Rodolfich, on his new job for three weeks, informed students on Friday, August 26, that there would be no school on Monday due to the expected hurricane. Before the weekend was over, the city was flooding, and teachers, school staff, students, and their families were heading out of town in search of higher ground. No one knew that the schools would not reopen until six weeks later, on October 6.

When Pascagoula families returned home in the following weeks, they found three to four feet of water in their houses and in the schools and businesses that were still standing. School officials found that two elementary schools, Beach and Gautier, were so severely damaged that they could not be used. Also destroyed were 27 school buses.

It took almost a month, until the end of September, for any sense of normalcy to return to the city and school district. Most teachers and staff members were able to come back to work, but many could not return to their homes. Teachers and other staff, along with volunteers, worked together to get the schools ready for classes to begin. The libraries and all their books had been destroyed, most of what was in the classrooms was gone, and computers did not work because they too had been under several feet of water.

Superintendent Rodolfich found that the first thing to be done to get the schools back to normal was to respond to the needs of students and employees. “We worked with an excellent team,” he said, “and we had to formulate a systematic plan of attack that included setting and achieving goals and being frugal in our spending habits. We had to treat the insurance company and restoration company personnel with respect and communicate our expectations with them in a firm manner.” He explained that decisions had to be made based on what was best for the students.

The greatest challenge for the superintendent and district staff was keeping everyone focused on achievement while they dealt with the devastation of their communities. “We had to create hope and promise, a light at the end of the tunnel.”

The students from the two damaged schools (331 of the 405 students who attended the two schools before the storm) were reassigned to other schools where there was space, and classes began on October 6, 2005. A total of 27 instructional days had been missed since that August day when the weekend storm threatened. Although Pascagoula had 6,729 students enrolled as of February 2006, this is 800 fewer students than before the storm, and that number includes many displaced students who had been in other school districts.

Although many Pascagoula families came back, many could not return to where they had lived before the storm, so students were enrolled wherever there was space. Many came from other hurricane-devastated areas. Some were living with relatives and friends, and others were living in the many trailer parks that had been hastily set up all over town. Grumman Northrup brought back its employees, and new workers were hired to replace those who were gone. The Federal Emergency Management Agency brought in a cruise ship to house people, and 1,000 families settled into their new quarters on the ship. Most of these families were from neighboring towns and cities, and although efforts were made to enroll children in their original schools,
many chose to attend Pascagoula schools instead. Neighboring school districts worked together to re-enroll students in school.

The Pascagoula school district continued to pay its teachers and other employees during this time, but some who left were not able to return, so their positions were filled with new hires as substitutes or temporary employees. The NCLB highly qualified requirements were set aside in order to get teachers in classrooms so that children could attend school.

The 27 days that schools were closed had to be made up. Classes continued through the normal vacation break for Thanksgiving and part of Mardi Gras vacation as well. The rest of the time was made up by adding an extra hour to each school day from October through January.

The tenacity and courage of the people has been the most dependable part of the recovery process, according to McLaurin. The entire school district staff had to cope with the devastation of their homes and neighborhoods while repairing and rebuilding their classrooms and schools to provide a safe place for the children. “Six months later we are still leaving debris-ridden streets and neighborhoods to come to provide a normal atmosphere where students are learning. They amaze me every day with their caring concern for the welfare and educational future of our children. I can’t say enough about these unselfish people who are making the situation bearable for the children of our community.”

Pascagoula residents have a new understanding of what normal is on the coast. As McLaurin explained, the losses of homes, furniture, family treasures and photos, cars, and businesses have been accepted. People have adjusted to the lack of privacy while living in the close quarters of a FEMA camper trailer. Historic structures that have weathered storms for 200 years are gone, and most will never be recreated. “The trees and landscaping that were so familiar to those of us who have lived here a long time are gone, and we are trying to establish a new way of life—a new normal,” she said. “That means waiting in line forever for groceries, fast food, or merchandise, having church in a tent, filling propane tanks every week so that you can cook, have hot water and heat in your FEMA camper; making do with fewer computers, library books, and classroom resources, using tables instead of desks, becoming experts on the language in insurance policies and FEMA worksheets, and most of all, feeling so very grateful for the things that really matter.”

Another challenge, according to McLaurin, was learning to accept help with grace. “Most of the people I know in our area are pretty self-reliant,” she explained, “and usually we do what has to be done without complaining and expecting someone to bail us out. After Katrina, we were unable to do everything that had to be done. But in early September, people started coming from all over the U.S. They brought basic supplies, and they also brought us hope. They gave of their money, their time, and their sweat. Even after six months, it is very difficult for some of us to accept gifts, but we will be forever grateful to all those who came to our aid.” McLaurin said the response from schools and districts, churches and faith-based organizations, the National Guard, and individuals from throughout the country has been overwhelming. She added, “I have truly learned the meaning of the terms American spirit and Christian charity, and there is no need for me to go through another Katrina to learn anything!”

As the school district begins to move forward, many unanswered questions remain. Will all the students and teachers return? Will the two schools be rebuilt? How much of the costs will be covered by FEMA restoration clean up, emergency impact aid, and flood insurance? The long-range toll on students and their families is not yet known, according to Susan McLaurin, director of state and federal programs, as new issues emerge every week. “Children are finding that the school is a safe place for them, though,” she said. “They are living in trailers in their front yards or trailer parks, and they have lost so much. These are difficult times for them. Also, the children are working hard at home to help their families get their houses cleaned up and ready for living.”
Overall Impact of NCLB

Pascagoula’s previous superintendent, Dr. Hank Bounds, left the district in July to become the superintendent of public instruction for the state of Mississippi. In his four years with Pascagoula, Dr. Bounds’ goal for the district was to meet and exceed the state and federal accountability expectations.

*Superior—Expect It!* was the district slogan that Bounds initiated, and it continues as the district focus. The new superintendent, Wayne Rodolfich, was previously the principal of Gautier High School, so he had been part of the Bounds team. All the pieces of NCLB accountability that were put in place in the past are still there.

Rodolfich, however, had many new issues to address in the first months of his new position. Instead of focusing on the academic performance of students, the new superintendent had to clean up the flood damage and replace roofs on schools. He had to find ways to salvage what was usable from the wrecked schools and flooded classrooms, libraries, and offices. Schools had to be opened, but they would not have textbooks, computers, and instructional supplies for the students and staff. Clearly, NCLB was not the highest priority in those weeks.

“All our efforts are still on our students,” said McLaurin, “even though we basically had to start over again in many ways. We’ll continue our academic programs, and we will make sure our students have the opportunities they need to be successful.”

NCLB and Student Achievement

The Pascagoula schools have been able to make adequate yearly progress at the elementary and high school levels, but the middle schools have had some difficulty with their subgroups of students with disabilities.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

All the Pascagoula schools made AYP in 2003, but in 2004, two schools, Colmer Middle School and Trent Lott Middle School, missed the reading/language arts target for students with disabilities. In 2005, Colmer made AYP in all areas, but Trent Lott missed the math target for students with disabilities. In Mississippi, schools enter improvement status after missing the same subject-matter target two years in a row. Therefore, Trent Lott is not yet in improvement. Even if the school had entered its first year of improvement, choice would not have been an issue, according to McLaurin, with all the hurricane-related problems of students and schools.

All other Pascagoula schools made AYP in 2005.

Testing Issues

Testing in Mississippi has been in place for the past four years for grades 2 through 8 in reading/language arts and mathematics. These tests are continuing in 2006, as are the subject area tests for high school. Two state-required tests, the TerraNova and the writing test for grades 3 and 7, have been eliminated for 2006. Science was scheduled for testing in 2006, but this test has been delayed until 2007.

Keeping track of the displaced students has been a challenge in the past months because the student database was destroyed, and school and district technological systems are being recreated. When all this is in place, there will be clear records of the students who were displaced from their schools or districts.
Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

Due to recovery from the hurricane and flooding, there have been no changes in curriculum and instruction in 2005-06.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS
All but 17 of Pascagoula teachers (3%) had met the highly qualified requirements of NCLB when school started in August 2005. But when classes began again in October, approximately 40 of the highly qualified teachers were unable to return to their jobs. Their houses were gone, and so were the jobs of their spouses.

“We hired temporary teachers because we had to get classrooms open for the students,” said McLaurin. “Some of the teachers were substitutes or student teachers in our district. The Praxis test was scheduled for September 1, but because of the circumstances, it was not given until November, so we went with what we had. Getting school started was our main priority.”

The overall percentage of highly qualified teachers in Pascagoula is 90% in the spring of 2006, well below the 97% rate at the start of the year. Because the Pascagoula School District is located in an officially designated “major disaster” area, the U.S. Department of Education will allow some flexibility regarding NCLB requirements for teachers to become highly qualified. According to McLaurin and Rodolfich, Pascagoula will need an extension of the deadline for highly qualified teachers. “We just can’t get highly qualified teachers to finish out this year,” said McLaurin. “We will soon begin the process for staffing for next school year, and it is our intention to recruit and employ only teachers who meet the highly qualified requirements.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Professional development for Pascagoula teachers and other staff has included counseling for emotional, family, and fiscal problems resulting from the hurricane and storm.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support
All the district’s paraprofessionals have met the NCLB qualifications.

Funding and Costs
The hurricane-related costs to the Pascagoula School District are anticipated to be huge. District officials estimate it will cost about $4 million to replace computers, furniture, musical instruments, equipment, furnishings, library books, and teaching supplies. The estimate for construction costs to repair damaged facilities is $14 million. The cost of rebuilding the two destroyed schools is not yet known. It’s estimated that damage from Katrina will cost the district about $35 million.

Three new grant programs—Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations, Emergency Impact Aid for Displaced Students, and Assistance for Homeless Youth, were made available for school districts through the Hurricane Education Recovery Act in order to meet the educational needs of students displaced by the hurricane. As of the end of February 2006, the only funds the Pascagoula School District had received were $1.5 million in restoration clean-up funds from FEMA. However, the district expects to receive $7.8 million in restart reimbursement funds that can be used for tutoring, summer school, and technology, and there may be funds available for displaced students. Nothing has yet been received from the district’s flood insurance.
Data File—Pascagoula School District

Location: Mississippi Gulf between Biloxi, Mississippi, and Mobile, Alabama
Type: Suburban

Number of Schools
- Total: 19 (Two elementary schools were destroyed by the hurricane.)
- Elementary: 11 (K-5)
- Middle/junior high: 3 (6-8)
- High schools: 2
- Other: 3 (alternative, technology center, exceptional needs)

Number of Title I schools: 16

Student Enrollment and Demographics
- Total enrollment: 6,729 (7,541 last year)
- White: 49%
- African American: 41%
- Latino: 7%
- Asian: 1%
- Other: 1%
- Low-income students: 81% (last year 63%)
- English language learners: 4%
- Students with disabilities: 15%

Teachers
- Total number of teachers: 578
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 90% (97% in August 2005)

Paraprofessionals
- Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 196
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 100%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing
- Total number of Title I and non-Title schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 2

Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

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Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

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