

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT

## When natural disaster strikes, will you be prepared?

By Dean A. Ragone

Whether your district is by the sea, landlocked in the Midwest, or nestled in deep-freeze-prone New England, no one can predict how or when a natural disaster will strike. But experience shows that when superintendents are prepared, they can reduce potential property damage, limit injuries to students and staff, and recover more rapidly so their schools can "return to learning."

### Floods

When a hurricane or tropical storm strikes, your school is at risk from flash flooding, which occurs within minutes or hours of excessive rainfall, as well as longer-term flooding that can last up to a week or more.

#### Minimize risk:

- Be sure drainpipes surrounding the facilities contain backflow valves to prevent sewage backup.
- Elevate electrical and other items located in the basement or other areas susceptible to flooding.

#### If a flood occurs:

- Enter the building only after authorities have indicated it is safe.
- Do not enter any building surrounded by floodwaters, as they can undermine foundations, causing sinking floors to crack or break and the building to collapse.

### Plan — assess — coordinate — remediate

**Plan** — Ensure that your district has a detailed crisis plan in place. In addition to the plan, and prior to an emergency, assemble a list of important e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers to distribute to key team leaders. Also, identify a property damage restoration company with 24/7 response.

**Assess** — If a natural disaster occurs, contact key team leaders and a property damage expert for an assessment. A qualified property damage expert will also help coordinate the property insurance claims process.

**Coordinate** — Timely communication and a coordinated response are key components to keeping the community informed of the nature of the disaster and the recovery efforts that are underway.

**Remediate** — When the initial danger has dissipated, the district must provide an accurate timetable for remediation.

For more information, go to [www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html). ■

### KEY POINTS

- Superintendents who are well prepared for natural disasters can minimize injuries and property damage.
- The potential for floods, freezing weather and smoke damage all demand specific preparation.
- Superintendents must not only react to a crisis, but also plan for remediation after the incident. ■

- Use extreme caution when entering facilities. Hidden damage, such as gas leaks or waterline or electrical system malfunctions, can make them unsafe.

- If floodwater exceeds one foot, wear protective gear, as floodwater can contain hazardous contaminants.
- Remove drywall and carpets. It will be easier to dry the building out and prevent mold.
- Don't try to salvage unnecessary items.

### Freezing weather

The bitter cold weather of winter can cause frozen pipes and damage from strong winds and heavy snows.

#### Minimize risk:

- Look for areas where wind can get under flashing, which can freeze pipes.
- Shut off any landscape sprinkler systems to prevent runoff from freezing on road surfaces.

### Up in smoke

A natural event like a forest fire or lightning strike can cause structural harm as well as smoke damage. "After the fire" activities can cause additional damage if you don't take appropriate, immediate action. A professional fire restoration company will renovate fire-damaged property and contents, determine which items can be refurbished, and estimate the cost of deodorizing and cleaning the school.

#### If a fire occurs:

- Don't touch or attempt to clean carpets, upholstered furniture, draperies, or other textile items. This will only smear soot into the fabric, making cleaning more difficult.
- Dry wet carpets, upholstered furniture and draperies as soon as possible to prevent mold and mildew.
- Treat carpets, upholstered furniture and draperies to eliminate odor.

### Insider Resource

**Dean A. Ragone:** Principal, allRisk Property Damage Experts, 501 Kennedy Boulevard, Somerdale, NJ 08083; (877) 247-5252; [www.teamallrisk.com](http://www.teamallrisk.com). ■