

# How the 2005 Hurricanes Affected Students in Louisiana

When the 2005 hurricanes struck the Gulf region, many students were displaced from their schools. The media ran a number of stories about the experiences of these students, discussing not only where they went but also what happened to them and the schools they entered. Unfortunately, the discussion was primarily based on anecdotal evidence.

The RAND Corporation sought to address the issue more empirically and systematically, focusing on Louisiana because it has a statewide data system that includes hurricane-related entries and exits from the public school system during the 2005–2006 school year and prior-year test-score data. To better understand how the displacement affected students, teachers, and schools, the study also surveyed principals from 415 of the state’s 1,240 schools serving displaced students.

## Where Did Displaced Students Go?

Based on Louisiana Department of Education administrative data records, more than a quarter of the state’s 740,000 public school students—over 196,000 students—were displaced from their schools during the 2005–2006 school year. Over 81 percent came from three parishes—Orleans, Jefferson, and Calcasieu.

The figure shows the enrollment status of displaced students throughout the school year. As shown, a large proportion of students whose schooling was affected by the two hurricanes reenrolled in their original schools within about a month after the storms. Other students were driven from their original schools, but they enrolled in other schools within their original parish. A third group of displaced students moved beyond their home parishes, relocating to other parishes in the state that had not planned for this enrollment increase. There remained a large proportion of students who were not enrolled in Louisiana public schools; some did enroll and subsequently dropped out, whereas others did not reenroll in the state’s public schools for the remainder of the school year. Students in this last group may have enrolled in schools in 48 other states or in private schools in Louisiana, or may not have enrolled in any

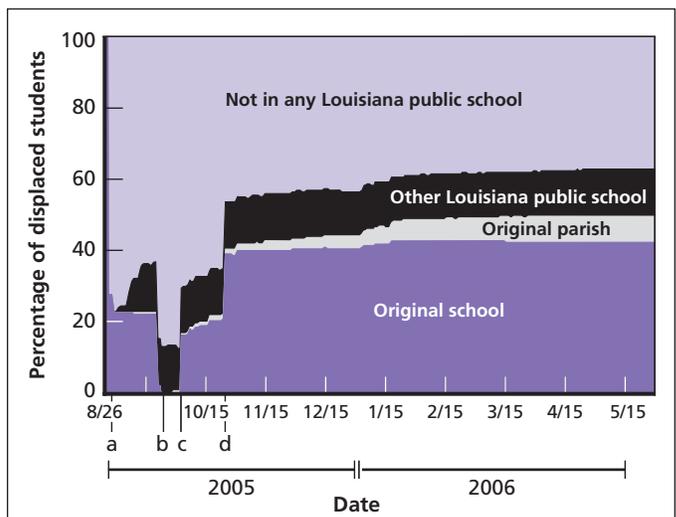
**Abstract**

Based on Louisiana Department of Education records, more than a quarter of the state’s 740,000 public school students were displaced by the 2005 hurricanes during the 2005–2006 school year. Many of these students missed a substantial amount of school time, and the burden fell disproportionately on black and low-achieving students. A survey of principals examined how dealing with the displaced students affected students, staff, and resources, including behavior and mental health issues and steps taken to address those issues.

school. This group could not be tracked, so it is unclear how many students did not enroll at all after the storms.

As suggested by the figure, many displaced students missed a great deal of schooling. Among displaced students who returned to Louisiana public schools (the bottom three areas), the median amount of time out of school until the first reenrollment was five weeks, with 25 percent missing less than three weeks and 20 percent missing more than seven weeks.

Also, nearly 65 percent of the displaced students were from racial and/or ethnic minority groups compared with 59 percent of the overall enrollment in the eight parishes from which most students came, and 52 percent statewide. Blacks



SOURCE: Louisiana Department of Education Student Information System data file.  
 NOTES: a = date Hurricane Katrina made landfall; b = date Hurricane Rita made landfall; c = date Jefferson Parish schools reopened; d = date Calcasieu Parish schools reopened.

were the largest minority group, and the group of students who did not enroll in any Louisiana public school included a disproportionately large percentage of black students and students who were achieving poorly before the hurricanes.

### **How Did the Displacement Affect Students, Teachers, and Schools?**

In analyzing survey responses, researchers divided schools into those with a high percentage and a low percentage of enrollment by displaced students (high impact and low impact, respectively). In the high-impact schools, displaced students amounted to 84 percent or more; in the low-impact schools, displaced students made up 36 percent of students or less.

Most school principals reported that the social behaviors of displaced students were similar to the behaviors of preexisting (regular) students; however, when differences were reported, displaced students were judged more likely to engage in negative behaviors, such as fighting and bullying, and less likely to engage in positive behaviors, such as participating in sports teams. Principals also noted that displaced students were more likely to need mental health counseling.

Some schools took a number of steps to address the needs of displaced students, including increasing their delivery of mental health counseling and tutoring. While there was a need for new staffing to meet this demand for services, most schools were unable to hire needed staff, primarily because of a lack of resources or funding.

One of the more pressing problems reported by principals was putting displaced students in the appropriate grade, classroom, and courses. While principals sought documentation on special needs, current grade-level placement, and prior grades and test scores, such information was generally not available, forcing them to rely on parents and guardians or the students themselves. Principals also noted that the pressures of state testing and accountability policies added to the hurricane-induced stresses.

Enrolling displaced students increased class sizes in more than a third of schools, and more than half of schools

needed additional classroom teachers and other types of staff, especially in high-impact schools. Principals frequently reported that these staffing needs went unmet, mostly because of lack of funding but also in some cases because of the lack of qualified applicants.

In many schools, principals reported that faculty members also experienced higher levels of work stress, job frustration, and absenteeism. These resulted from the storms' effects on teachers' own lives, as well as from staffing shortfalls and strains on other key resources.

Books and supplies, furniture, transportation resources, and classroom space were also needed. In many schools, these needs were met, sometimes by donations from outside sources; in other schools, the needs persisted throughout the school year.

Finally, principals reported new needs for professional development, yet found it more difficult than in the past to provide release time for teachers to attend. Similarly, issues related to displacement diverted attention from other school activities and issues.

### **Implications**

The student displacement in Louisiana caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita persisted throughout the entire 2005–2006 school year and will likely continue. Over the coming years, it likely will be necessary to continue helping these students recover and to prevent further damage that could result from untreated mental health problems or continued loss of schooling. Schools throughout the state and the nation will continue to be called on to serve these students, and it is imperative that they obtain the resources they need to serve them well.

In addition, policies and resources to help teachers manage their own hurricane-related problems and mental health needs might ultimately improve the services that teachers provide to students. Finally, education officials at both the state and local levels would benefit from better access to complete and accurate student records and a national system to coordinate the two-way sharing of student information across state boundaries. ■

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