



California
Center for
School Climate



AUDIO GALLERY

Paradise Unified School District

BUTTE COUNTY, CA

This audio gallery is a product of the California Center for School Climate (CCSC), a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and trainings on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California.

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POST-DISASTER MOBILIZATION TOWARD HEALING & RECOVERY

Experts predict that wildfires, heat, and flooding will escalate in frequency over the next few years, interrupting our daily lives through school closures, housing losses, and more.¹ In fact, the eight largest fires in state history have all struck in the past five years,² prompting school leaders to develop institutional knowledge and strategies to support students in the aftermath of natural disasters.³

The small town of Paradise experienced the most destructive wildfire in California history in November 2018. Paradise lost 156,336 acres, 14,000 homes, and four school facilities to the disastrous fire.⁴ School staff drove through the burning town to evacuate 3,401 students the morning that the fire hit. Countywide, more than 4,800 students and 380 staff were left homeless by the fire.⁵ The trauma of the fire, compounded by the loss of home and school environments, had an enormous impact on the well-being of the entire school community.

District leadership took immediate steps to open temporary school locations, ensuring that students could remain enrolled in Paradise Unified School District (PUSD). This was crucial for maintaining some form of consistency for the school community in allowing students to retain connections formed with teachers and peers.⁶ Once temporary school spaces were open, assessing the needs of the community was a critical first step in planning PUSD's response post-fire. TK-6 students were assessed with the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS), while 7-12th graders were evaluated with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) assessment. Both tools informed schoolwide efforts to support the social-emotional well-being of students.

PUSD leadership also leveraged a multi-tiered system of support approach in addressing staff wellness in the weeks and months after the fire. Though the need for trauma response training was immediately apparent, educators suffering from individual and secondary traumatic stress needed more time to recover. Leadership officials from the county stepped in during this time of high need by coordinating the assignment of counselors that acted as “first responders” to support the urgent mental and emotional needs of staff.⁷ County and community partnerships with organizations like the North Valley Community Foundation funded counselors, but finding candidates to fill the positions proved a challenge. The first cadre of counselors came out of retirement and volunteered their services to fill the gap of mental health needs in the schools. Many continue to work within PUSD, including Scott Lindstrom, a Coordinator of Trauma Response and Recovery for Butte County, who reflected, “it’s really important for us to look at each other, see each other, and appreciate the fact that we are in this together. That’s been healing for me.” The commitment that staff members have shown to the ongoing recovery efforts throughout the town of Paradise underscores the crucial role of relationship-building across communities and counties in emergency preparedness.

School Information	
Number of students	1,533
Geographic setting	Rural
Grades served	TK–12
School model	Various

Student Demographics	
White	76.4%
Latinx	13.0%
Multiracial	6.8%
Native American/Alaska Native	2.1%
Black	0.8%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.7%
Students with disabilities	16.6%
English language learners	0.8%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	67.6%

Data sourced from the [California School Dashboard](#).



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Consider while you listen . . .

Recent data show an upward trend in school closures due to a variety of factors, including disasters brought upon by climate change. **What plans does your community have in place to support students and families during traumatic or unexpected events?**

Partnerships with local organizations and relationships within the community enabled the Paradise Unified School District to provide counseling and other vital resources for staff and students. **What community partnerships and relationships could your team draw upon to provide essential supports for your school community?**

References

- ¹ Becker, R, & Cart, J. (2022). *Report to California legislature: Prepare for sweeping effects of climate change*. LAist. <https://laist.com/news/climate-environment/report-to-california-legislature-prepare-for-sweeping-effects-of-climate-change>
- ² CAL FIRE. (2022). Top 20 largest California wildfires. https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/4jandlhh/top20_acres.pdf
- ³ Preston, C. (2021). *Climate change is sabotaging education for America's students – and it's only going to get worse*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/climate-change-is-sabotaging-education-for-americas-students-and-its-only-going-to-get-worse/>
- ⁴ Hagerty, C. (2019). *The survivors*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/10/16/20908291/camp-fire-wildfire-california-paradise-survivors>
- ⁵ Lambert, D., & Washburn, D. (2018). *Tears, hugs mark reunion of Paradise students and teachers*. EdSource. <https://edsource.org/2018/tears-hugs-mark-reunion-of-paradise-students-and-teachers/605582>
- ⁶ Betz, J. (2020). *Community-care strategies for schools during the coronavirus crisis: Practical tips for school staff and administrators*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/community-care-strategies-for-schools-covid-19>
- ⁷ Browning, A., & Romer, N. (2020). *To create safe and healthy schools during a pandemic, prioritize educator wellbeing*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/to-create-safe-and-healthy-schools-during-a-pandemic-prioritize-educator-wellbeing/#>