

From the Bottom Up: School Library Media Centers and the Flood of 1999

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It loomed large and menacing on the weather maps. Hurricane Floyd, one of the most powerful storms ever to threaten the eastern United States, charged northward toward land with potentially catastrophic winds of 155 miles per hour. With hurricane force winds extending 140 miles from the core, torrential rains, a large storm surge, and the hurricane mass approximating an area the size of Texas, residents of the East Coast cast a wary eye, as they stocked up on essentials and evacuated to safe ground. By early Wednesday, September 15, the weather forecasters expected the center of Floyd to make landfall between Myrtle Beach and Wilmington and then scoot quickly into North Carolina following a path similar to that of Interstate 95. Edgecombe County was dead center.

At 10:00 A.M. on Wednesday, September 15, school officials made the decision to release students at noon. Faxes went out to the schools with instructions to shut down the file servers, along with reminders to media coordinators to back up collection and circulation data and take storage media off site. Media coordinators, fearing damage from windows blown in as a result of destructive winds and leaky roofs, hurriedly placed plastic bags over computers and moved books away from windows and other vulnerable areas. What everyone feared was wind and water damage from above. Little did we imagine the danger posed by water from below.

By Thursday, despite interminable, hard-driving rain, Floyd had weakened

from a Category 5 storm to a Category 3. As the hurricane wended its way over eastern North Carolina, wind gusts rarely exceeded 60 miles per hour. We thought Edgecombe was home free! What we did not notice, however, was that the trees that toppled over seemed to lose their footing as a result of water-saturated roots rather than strong wind gusts. It was an omen of what was to come.

And the water began to rise!!!! Creeks, streams, and the usually placid Tar River began to overflow their banks fueled by the incessant rain that accompanied Floyd and the high water levels that remained from Hurricane Dennis, a hurricane that had meandered off the coast of Cape Hatteras two weeks earlier. The Tar River in Greenville inundated homes early Thursday evening, and the water began to rise in Tarboro and surrounding rural areas in the wee hours of Friday morning. When the water ended its inexorable climb to unprecedented levels, approximately forty percent of the land area of Edgecombe County was under water. The Edgecombe County School system found two of its fourteen schools totally flooded, to the extent that nothing was salvageable. Pattillo A+ Elementary School, in East Tarboro, was more than two-thirds submerged by water. Princeville Montessori School, in the flood basin of the Tar River, was covered by more than twenty feet of water.

In the immediate aftermath, conditions were chaotic. School officials worked frantically to determine how and where students in these two facilities would be temporarily housed until per-

manent buildings could be constructed. Once the decision to use mobile units was made, the media coordinators waited expectantly to find out if separate units would be available for media centers. Frequent meetings with FEMA officials led to frustration; instructions for determining losses, assessing value of items destroyed, and ordering equipment and materials seemed to change on a daily basis. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that many employees who lived in adjacent cities or outlying areas could not get to the central office in Tarboro because of washed-out bridges and flooded roadways.

A particular problem arose when we began to work with the school system fixed asset inventory list. In many instances, it was extremely difficult to determine the type of item or equipment listed because the description was sketchy or the information was limited. In addition, there was no consistency in terminology. This situation led to a great deal of aggravation and guesswork.

When public awareness of the extent of the school system loss began to develop, unsolicited donations started to arrive. School supplies, equipment, and printed materials began to accumulate in such quantities that a separate reception and distribution center was set up in an unused warehouse. With the goal of providing reading materials in our classrooms before media centers could be formally established, we requested the assistance of vendors with whom we do business on a regular basis. Many vendors called us to announce that donations of books had been shipped or to inquire

about our immediate needs.

At this point, unfortunately, some central office personnel refiled orders for materials that had been purchased in recent years without consulting the media supervisor and the school media coordinator or without regard for changed needs. In other cases, central office personnel consulted closely with school staff members to carefully weigh and consider instructional needs. All involved were in total agreement, however, that a high priority should be placed on providing an abundance of reading materials in both classrooms and in the hands of the many students whose homes were lost as a result of the flood. To this end, classroom paperback libraries were developed, and many donated materials were collected and distributed in order to replenish the home or personal libraries of students whose homes were lost in the flood.

Prior to the flood, Pattillo's media center collection contained over 12,000 items, and the goal was to replace as much of the collection as possible as quickly as possible in order to provide the students and teachers with materials and resources needed to support the curriculum and promote a love of reading. The size of the replacement collection consequently determined the direction of the services offered by the media center. The media coordinator and principal decided to order bookcases, storage cabinets, computer tables, and two desks for the media center staff. In order to have adequate space to house the collection in a centralized location, it was decided that tables and chairs for students would not be ordered. Any instruction requiring seating for students would be provided in the classrooms. In the media center, classes

would sit on the floor along one wall during class checkout. Students were very cooperative and did not complain about the cramped space.

Prior to the flood, the media center collection contained a large number of classroom novel sets that were used by the teachers in conjunction with Edgemcombe County Schools' Language Arts Instructional Delivery System. Ordering replacement sets for use in the classrooms was a top priority during the weeks following the flood. These sets quickly put books in the hands of the teachers and students within the first week of classes.

Pattillo has used the Accelerated Reader program for four years and several of the teachers have earned Model Classroom status. The media center is also recognized by Renaissance Professional Development as a Model Library. In order for our students to have access to the books needed for the Reading Renaissance program, replacing books from the Accelerated Reader program became the second area of focus for our school. A plea for help on the Accelerated Reader listserv brought in donations of paperback books and library quality books for classroom libraries from across the country. A school in Canada also became involved in the campaign to replace the books in our classrooms. Library quality books to support the program were also ordered with FEMA funds.

Pattillo's media center is also the "distribution center" for resources to support the curriculum. The third segment of replacement orders contained teaching resources for math, language arts, social studies, science, and health. The School Improvement Team met to determine

which resources would be most effective for meeting the needs of all the teachers and students. With the current emphasis on End-of-Grade testing, many of the resources in the initial orders were materials that teachers could use to prepare their children for the reading, writing, and math tests.

After the first three rounds of replacement orders, the media coordinator focused on replacing the remaining books in the collection. This round of orders contained many books and resources from a wide range of topic areas such as poetry, science, and technology that rounded out the media center collection to the extent that it now contains approximately 12,000 volumes.

Services in the media center have been limited to circulation and curriculum development. Students began checking out books in January, 2000 on a fixed/flexible schedule. Each class also has a 30-minute class checkout time every other week. Unfortunately, due to the amount of space devoted to shelving and resources, students are unable to use the media center for research. By the fall of 2000, the restoration of the school's local area network will be complete so that students will have access to electronic information resources from their classrooms and the computer laboratory.

The priority for the media coordinator at Princeville Montessori School was to restore the regularly scheduled library classes for each grade level and to get books in the hands of the students. Prior to the flood, each class participated in a 45-minute library visit each week. Teachers and staff felt that it was important that students return to as much of a regular media center schedule as possible. Since

the designated mobile unit was initially in use as a clearinghouse for donated items, it was impossible to have the children visit the media center.

The media staff was challenged to find a way to bring the media center to the classroom. They fashioned a large cardboard box to resemble a miniature bookmobile. Each day the bookmobile was filled with storybooks for storytime, craft supplies for extension activities, and a generous collection of reading material for student selection. The media center staff traveled from classroom to classroom for the regularly scheduled "library" time. After

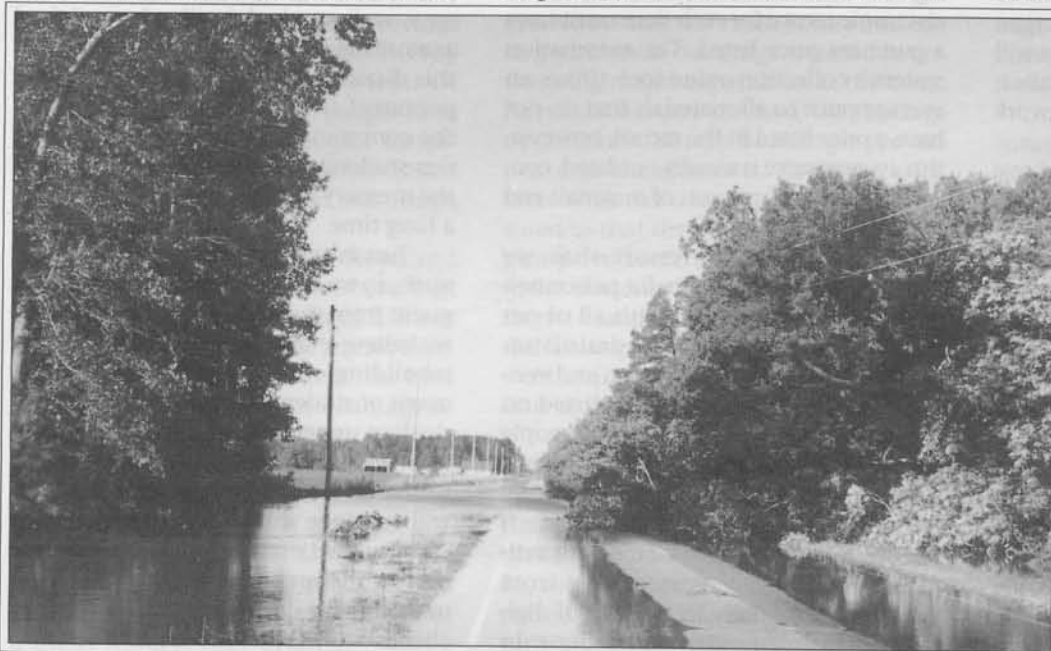


Photo courtesy Gary Weathersbee.

the story and activity, each student was allowed to select a book from the bookmobile. The bookmobile was a welcome sight for both students and teachers.

In the meantime, the media staff was busy cataloging thousands of donated books. Thanks to the generosity of the local cable television company, the Princeville media center received a new Pentium computer appropriate for use as a circulation station. The media automation program was quickly installed. Since electronic records were not available for the donated titles, it was necessary to seek cataloging information from several sources. Books that contained cataloging-in-publication data were addressed first. A lesson in original cataloging from the media supervisor allowed the staff to begin this monumental task. Later, a multi-purpose MARC record database was purchased, which allowed this work to proceed at a much faster pace. In addition, MARC record data was located through the use of SUNLINK, the Florida union catalog of school library holdings. Over 3,500 books were cataloged using these methods.

In late February, the principal suspended library classes for one week so that the media staff could finish the task of cataloging, labeling, and shelving the collection. Thanks to the efforts of parent volunteers, the media center collection was ready for circulation on March 1. Students, teachers, and parents were thrilled to have checkout available once again. The students of Princeville Montessori were delighted with their collection of new books. Donated books and flood replacement orders continued to arrive and were incorporated in the collection as quickly as possible. By the end of April 2000, the number of volumes in the collection topped 4000. Unfortunately, students will not have access to electronic information resources on a school local area network until a new facility is complete.

The school media coordinators have learned much from these experiences, and the learning process will undoubtedly continue until we succeed in establishing new, fully-functioning media centers. The first and most important lesson is that we must be ever vigilant and alert to the possibility of disaster striking, whether from water, fire, wind, or other destructive forces. While it is impossible to prepare a contingency plan for every conceivable calamity, a plan should be in place that outlines the steps to be followed in reestablishing media services in our schools following substantial losses.

First and foremost, the development

of this plan should emphasize the requirement to take a long, hard look at what needs to be accomplished before any action is taken. Decisions made precipitously can cause additional problems in the future. The rebuilding and restocking plan that is developed must be guided by current instructional priorities and not based on ideas or instructional practices that were prevalent years earlier. Decisions to order or purchase new equipment and materials must be based on the current and anticipated new environment or facility, the situation, available space, and the personnel. In essence, three plans must be developed — short-term for immediate needs to begin instruction, mid-term for resources while still within the temporary campus, and long-term for total collection replacement in the development of a permanent facility. It is vital that the media coordinator, the media supervisor, or someone experienced and skilled in media services and operations is closely involved in the ordering of materials and equipment. As a result of orders placed by central office personnel who lacked knowledge of automation systems and current media center procedures and practices, many hours had to be spent communicating changes to vendors on barcode symbology and number sequences.

Our experience has taught us that media coordinators must develop and maintain separate inventories of all materials and equipment without reliance on the school system fixed asset inventory list. Everything owned by the media center should be entered into the electronic catalog, and both digital and print records must be kept in the school building and off site, as well. In addition, the electronic record for each item must have a purchase price listed. The automation system's collection value tool affixes an average price to all materials that do not have a price listed in the record; however, this average price is usually outdated, considering the current costs of materials and equipment.

The last major lesson that we learned is that we, as media personnel, must communicate well with all of our communities — teachers, administrators, parents, potential donors, and vendors. Specific needs should be listed on the school system Web site, and people who desire to make donations should be encouraged to call to discuss the situation with school and system level personnel. We should not be meek or reticent in requesting replacements from vendors, particularly in the area of digital media or computer applications. In

most cases, we purchase the rights to content and actual applications rather than the physical media. Do not hesitate to request retrospective conversion material or other data from the vendor's archives, if needed and still available. In our case, this proved very helpful in determining collection value after one media coordinator inadvertently left a briefcase with the collection data disks in the media center in her haste to leave.

What will the future bring to the two flooded school media centers in Edgecombe County? Both Pattillo A+ Elementary School and Princeville Montessori School will enjoy newly-constructed facilities featuring spacious, well-appointed media centers with up-to-date materials and equipment. The media coordinators will feel confident that their input into the planning and design process was accurately based on current media program requirements and practices, solid collection development needs, and well-documented student and faculty usage patterns. Audiovisual equipment, computers and peripherals, and media center materials in all formats will be new and current, obviating the need for large expenditures to update books and equipment for a number of years. Computer platforms will be standardized, eliminating a problem that has plagued both schools in the recent past. Students will have access to a wide variety of materials, in both print and electronic formats, to satisfy their information needs and leisure reading pursuits, and teachers will have access to contemporary instructional and supplementary materials to use in the curriculum.

Most important, however, is that the joy of teaching and learning in a brand-new, well-stocked facility be weighed against the human factor — the toll that this disaster had on the students, school personnel, their families, and members of the community. While the education of our students will continue unimpeded, the memory of this disaster will linger for a long time.

Just as the water seeped up from the earth, so we had to rebuild our media programs from the bottom up. Nevertheless, we believe that we were successful in our rebuilding efforts because we kept the needs of students, teachers, and the curriculum uppermost in mind. It is hoped that the collaboration that evolved between media coordinators and teachers will continue so that wise decisions will continue to be made to acquire the very best in instructional and media center materials for our students, our primary clients.