

September 5, 2005

**Dear Fellow Members of the Georgia Crisis Assistance Team for Schools (GCATS)  
Members and Georgia Association of School Psychologists:**

Even though we are hundreds of miles away, all of us are impacted indirectly and/or directly by Hurricane Katrina. Many of you may live in a town or city that has been designated as a relocation center for many of the children and adults who have been displaced by Katrina. Schools throughout Georgia will be facing the challenge to address the complex and significant needs of these students and families that extend well beyond space, costs, curriculum issues, educational records, etc.

We know that the material and physical losses are tremendous and overwhelming, and many of these children and adults have witnessed events and experienced sensorial images that are very unsettling and traumatic. Even though many of the victims of Hurricane Katrina currently may be experiencing a “rollercoaster of emotions” including shock, disbelief, sadness, confusion, anxiety, anger, guilt, and/or hopelessness, we also know that *most* children and adults will be able to reconstruct their lives, particularly if certain conditions are met. These include but are not limited to the following: providing safe and secure environments; attending to basic needs; providing social, emotional, and peer support; and developing familiar routines, structure, and predictability. School psychologists and their crisis response teams will also need to provide group and individual support to children and their parents by providing opportunities for them to acquire information and understanding regarding crisis reactions and to reconnect with their adaptive strengths for dealing with difficult situations.

We know that meeting basic needs (i.e., housing, food, clothing, sleep, rest, safety, medical needs, etc.) is extremely important initially and enhances one’s ability to confront and deal with the emotional reactions that have and are occurring. Likewise, efforts focused on providing for basic needs and emotional needs will facilitate a student’s academic performance and adjustment to a new school environment. Focusing one’s energies on academics may be very difficult or next to impossible if a student is preoccupied with his/her basic needs and/or emotional reactions. Therefore, it becomes extremely important in the next few days, weeks, and months ahead for school personnel and school crisis response teams to create environments that provide support to students and their families and facilitate the reconstruction of their lives.

The involvement of school psychologists and the crisis response teams will be essential resources for providing information regarding crisis reactions and needs to the attention of system administrators and personnel. Since the basic needs are great and help from various agencies may not be immediately available, there are some things that your school system and crisis response teams may need to implement. In addition to a few reminders listed below, I am attaching an excellent handout created by the National Association of School Psychologists, “Responding to Hurricane Katrina: Helping Students Relocate and Supporting Their Mental Health Needs.” The following are a few reminders and points that may be helpful to consider when addressing the needs of the students and parents relocating to your school district:

Dr. Joe M. Nail

Coordinator of Psychological Services (Clayton County Public Schools)  
Co-Chair of Georgia Crisis Assistance Team for Schools (GCATS), a service of the Georgia  
Association of School Psychologists (GASP)

## 1. Basic Needs:

- a. Clothing and Food Banks: You may need to implement the collection of items for food and clothing banks as well as other economic needs since resources are not always immediately available following a disaster such as this.
- b. Family Assistance Centers: Creating a “family assistance center” is a practical way to address the myriad of basic needs created by such a disaster by bringing all the community resources to a central location. This efficiently brings the resources to the people as opposed to the people having to search out the resources that may be spread out over a town or city. Remember that many of these people already have limited resources at this time and are under a lot of stress. In these centers you may want to include stations/booths for community agencies that address the following: housing/shelter; food; unemployment; transportation; payment of bills, loans, mortgages; healthcare and medication; drivers’ licenses; insurance; clothing; communication with family members and friends; information regarding the school system and academic needs; diverse spiritual needs; etc.
  - i. Providing “companions” to accompany people as they enter the assistance centers and as they access the various agencies/resources may be needed since crisis often reduces one’s clarity of thought and cognition. Crisis team members who are trained in crisis reactions may also be able to offer emotional support and information/handouts regarding mental health resources if needed. This should never be forced upon anyone.
- c. You can also offer a family resource night based upon the concept above.

2. Diverse Culture, Language, and Spiritual Needs:

- a. Keep in mind that many of the relocated children and families may be of diverse culture, language, and/or religious beliefs.
- b. Utilizing interpreters will be critical in providing information and support to those with minimal English skills. Making information available in various languages is critical when possible.
- c. Remember to be sensitive to and respect cultural and religious differences. Do not impose your own values and beliefs onto others.

3. Individual and Group Crisis Intervention (Providing the Emotional Band-Aid and Safety Net):

- a. Identify students and families may need support in dealing with crisis reactions (physical and emotional) as they register for school. Give information sheets regarding crisis support and resources to the parents as they enroll the students.
- b. Develop a system for offering support through groups as well as on an individual basis. You may need to create groups for parents as well. Those individuals providing crisis support should be familiar with basic physical and emotional reactions to disasters and trauma. This is a critical time for listening carefully to the students and adults. Providing information regarding common reactions to disasters and traumas is also critical in fostering understanding that their reactions are “normal reactions to abnormal events.” This often reduces the anxiety and fear that a person experiencing these reactions is “going crazy.”

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- c. You may want to organize a review for the crisis team and/or mental health personnel regarding crisis reactions, your crisis response protocol, and response goals to make sure that everyone is on the same page. Students and adults will need to know what they can expect over the next few days, weeks, and months ahead as well as things they can do to address their concerns, needs, and fears.
  - d. During times like these victims of disaster often feel hopeless and overwhelmed. Although a person may not feel that things will ever get better, it may be helpful to hear that we know from working with people in similar situations that the reactions tend to become less intense and frequent over time and with support from others.
  - e. Reminder: Providing individuals and groups with opportunities to tell their stories and to talk about their experience can be very helpful. Because people have experienced so many losses, they may grieve these losses as well as attempt to deal with the traumatic events they may have witnessed. Talking about their emotions and reactions may allow them to begin to diffuse some of the emotional reactions by releasing the “emotional steam from the emotional pressure cooker.” Telling the story over and over can be a way of processing and integrating the event.
  - f. As time progresses be aware of individuals who continue to experience intense and frequent reactions. These individuals may need further support within and outside of the school setting. Note, however, that it is not uncommon for sensorial images and emotional reactions to be triggered when people come in contact with sensations or events similar to the trauma. The trauma and associated emotions may be replayed; however, the frequency and intensity of these reactions usually diminish with time.
  - g. Remember to address students with special needs.
4. Teacher Information:
- a. You may want to provide teachers with information regarding crisis reactions and addressing the needs of students who have experienced disasters and trauma. See the attached handout.
  - b. Provide opportunities for social support by peers and adults.
  - c. Be sensitive to student’s needs and be flexible with assignments, testing, and curriculum issues during times of emotional upheaval and/or when basic needs need to be addressed.
5. SEE THE ATTACHED NASP HANDOUT FOR GREAT IDEAS FOR SUPPORT.

I hope this information is helpful to you now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Joe M. Nail, Ph.D.  
Co-Chair of GCATS, A Service of GASP  
Coordinator of Psychological Services  
Clayton County Public Schools

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