Thoughts For Administrators of Schools Impacted by Wildfires

We know that wildfires have risen dramatically recently, but until it hits home in your own district, it is difficult to grasp the kind of support your staff, students and families will need.

Most available guidelines focus on the initial response - immediate survival, safety, and support for those impacted. What is often lacking is the "What next?" and "How does this change or influence what I need to do on the first day of inservicing and then the first days of school?" and finally, "What does recovery over the long term look like?"

We're going to look at what's next and begin to understand long-term recovery. Here are some important considerations.

1. **You'll be in this for the long haul.** Begin by engaging your family in conversations about your increased need for self-care, for family time, and for activities that will help you take breaks from the stress. Connect with other administrators for mutual support and sharing of ideas. Stay well so you can stay in the game.
2. **Don't rush back toward "normal."** We often think that getting back to normal quickly will provide the most stability for everyone. In the short term, there is no "back to normal." If this isn't big enough to be outside of the norm, what is? Pushing toward normalcy leaves many people behind. It also misses the opportunity to create deeper relationships, increase trust, and build a stronger foundation for facing future crises. Instead of looking for "normal," consider these:
    a. Acknowledge that this is new and challenging; mention the actions of everyone from fire fighters to neighbors who took courageous actions.
    b. Speak to the wide variation in levels of impact to those in your school community. Use this opportunity to acknowledge what's been learned, what is still needed, the strengths within the staff that will enable the whole school to move forward in the best way possible.
    c. Remind those less affected that their participation is critical, that they are the ballast that provides steady movement forward and their good will and support for others is foundational in the district meeting everyone's needs.

3. **Be aware of striking a balance.** Hold space for recovery. Strike a balance between direct recovery work (such as conversations/meetings re: ongoing needs) and "reweaving the fabric" of your school culture with shared meals or treats or activities for enjoyment. Time for casual conversation is well worthwhile by allowing people to share parts of their stories with one another and diffuse anxiety.

4. N**aming something is the beginning of mastery.** Conversation allows people to identify and name their anxieties, which is essential for problem-solving.

© CHERI LOVRE

5. **Recognize the benefit of problem-solving in recovery.** Offering counseling sessions is great, but few will engage. Much that can be done at the building level can foster resilience:
    a. Fostering a school climate of patience and understanding will support those who feel anxious.
    b. Discussions in grade-level, departmental or small group meetings work well for this process.
    c. Engage staff in identifying their concerns about students and what steps might be helpful. This allows people to put words to their anxiety and the concerns they have for others, and that can help decrease their fight-or-flight hyper-arousal.
        i. Ask questions like, "What struggles do you think students will be bringing into the classroom?" Help them identify likely reactions – that students may have trouble sleeping and be extremely tired, or that they may be anxious about any number of things. Then "normalize" these reactions without using the word "normal, i.e., "That's probably true for a lot of us, too." Give permission to be where they are instead of trying to act normally when they're struggling. It builds trust to know that you understand that recovery is long.
        ii. **This normalizes their own reactions**, which also makes it easier for staff to come to you with concerns and know that you won't brush them aside or tell them to "buck up."

To adapt this for your first staff meetings, consider covering these thoughts:

- We never could have dreamed we'd be hit like this with a wildfire.
- When things like this happen, people have a wide range of reactions.
- We get through tough times by how we come together. We need to balance working on recovery together and enjoyable activities that bring us together.
- I want your help in identifying concerns for opening school and insights you have so we can be as prepared as possible heading into the school year.
- I expect us all to work hard to be patient, supportive, and kind to one another.
- What are your concerns? What do you need to feel supported to start the year?
- What should we be doing for our families?

Cheri Lovre of Crisis Management Institute (CMI) has provided training for Flight Teams (crisis response teams) for decades and has responded to a variety of mass-casualty and overwhelming events that have impacted schools. CMI also has a free parent website at <parents.cmionline.com> that addresses anxiety and sleep difficulties related to trauma.

Questions? Want more help planning? ***Text*** *503-508-6767 or info@cmionline.org to reach Cheri.*

This link *will take you to guidelines for staff in supporting the youth,*