

## EDUCATION

# Houston Schools Face Huge Cleanup as Some Aim to Open Soon

At one elementary school, papers welcome students for an August first day that never happened

*By Tawnell D. Hobbs and Melissa Korn*

Sept. 4, 2017 5:30 am ET

HOUSTON—Neatly printed fliers welcoming each student back to the start of school sat on worktables in a classroom at A.G. Hilliard Elementary School in northeast Houston, but the students won't be there anytime soon.

The campus took on 4 feet of water in some areas and desks now sit in puddles alongside sodden books and materials.

The past week has been a time of harsh reckoning and frantic planning for school officials across southeast Texas, as administrators assess the toll Hurricane Harvey has taken on school buildings and the storm's impact on at least one million schoolchildren.

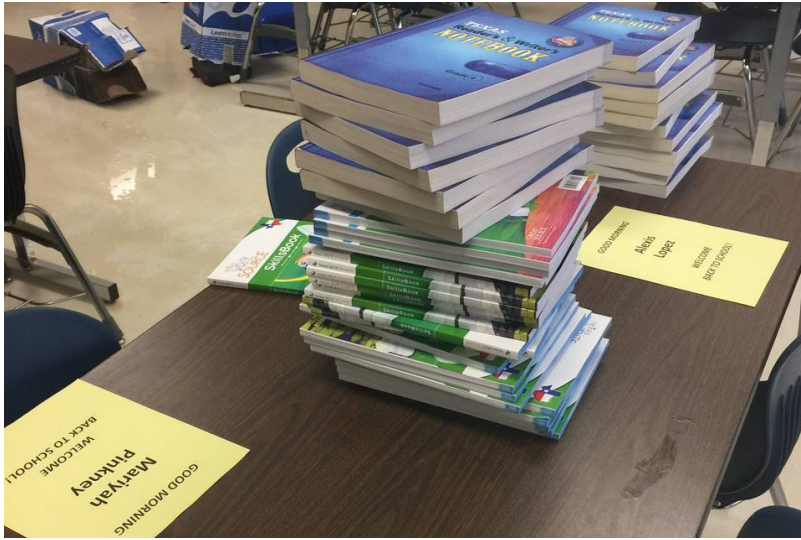
A walk-through of Hilliard Elementary on Saturday provided a glimpse into the work ahead, as dozens of districts scramble to reopen as soon as Tuesday. Desks and file cabinets were strewn across the school's gymnasium, displaced by the rush of water and then stranded when the flood subsided.

District officials said flooring and walls will have to be removed, and waterlogged books and supplies replaced. It could be several months before the school is reopened, officials said.

"This is a heartfelt tragedy for many of us," said Houston Independent School District Board President Wanda Adams. "It's going to take a lot of money to restore these schools."

The Houston ISD, with roughly 218,000 students, was still assessing damage to school facilities over the weekend and doesn't yet have a cost estimate of the work needed.

By Saturday, more than 200 of 288 schools had some water intrusion, with at least 50 suffering extensive damage, according to Chief Operating Officer Brian Busby,



Welcome fliers for students at Hilliard Elementary. PHOTO: TAWNELL D. HOBBS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Houston district, the nation's seventh largest, was scheduled to start school on Aug. 28. It is now expected to open on Sept. 11. Houston ISD is the largest of about 18 school districts in the metro Houston area.

Even then, between 10,000 and 12,000 students enrolled in schools that need extensive repairs, like Hilliard, will be relocated.

Superintendent Richard Carranza left open the possibility that the first day of school could be postponed beyond Sept. 11, so as to "not put students or staff in harm's way."

Spring Branch Independent School District, just west of downtown Houston, plans to remain closed at least through Sept. 8.



A foyer floor at Hilliard Elementary. PHOTO: TAWNELL D. HOBBS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"We have many, many families who have had total loss to their homes," said Linda Buchman, community relations officer for the Spring Branch district. "Our families are in crisis right now. They're trying to figure out where to live, how to get food and clothing. They're in survival mode."

An FAQ posted to the Spring Branch ISD website included assurances that students displaced by the hurricane can be enrolled in neighborhood schools immediately, without the normal paperwork, and that the district was looking to extend library hours or find other ways of providing academic support for families whose homes and school supplies were damaged.

Ms. Buchman said Spring Branch, which serves about 35,000 students and had no “catastrophic” facilities damage, is looking into options for a meal program for before school starts, similar to what it runs during the summer. The district said it got a waiver from the state allowing it to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students through the end of the month; nearly 60% of students regularly qualify for free or reduced lunch plans.



Houston Independent School District Superintendent Richard Carranza in a classroom with water on the floor at A.G. Hilliard Elementary School on Saturday. PHOTO: DAVID J. PHILLIP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Houston ISD will provide three free meals a day for enrolled students throughout the school year. In announcing the move last week, Mr. Carranza said he hoped to ease parents’ concerns and “provide a sense of normalcy” for students whose family lives may have been disrupted by the storm.

Some schools on dry land transformed their gyms into emergency shelters last week, and then as families were moved into mega-shelters in Houston or relocated to friends and family elsewhere, became distribution centers for food, water and clothing.

Sam Houston State University, about 70 miles north of Houston, late Wednesday turned its basketball coliseum into a staging area for about 500 Texas Army National Guard personnel assisting in the relief effort.

“They’re going to be our guests for a few days, or as long as they’re needed,” said spokeswoman Julia May.

The campus, which saw leaks in some buildings but no serious damage, will resume classes on Tuesday.

The University of Houston also plans to start classes on Tuesday—but asked that students not return much before Monday, as staffing levels remain limited. The roughly 140 students who had been in one flooded housing facility will temporarily relocate to a residence hall that is furnished but empty, having previously been scheduled for demolition.

Overall, colleges fared relatively well during the storm, and most in the region expected to reopen Tuesday.

But at least one school district, the Aransas County Independent School District in Rockport, Texas—a small coastal city where Harvey first made landfall and damage is extensive—is closed indefinitely for repairs.

Superintendent Joseph Patek recommended in a statement that parents enroll their children in the school district where they are currently staying or have family. Aransas enrolls about 3,300 students, according to its website.

“We used the word ‘indefinitely’ because we are attempting to be as transparent as possible,” Mr. Patek said. “We do not have a timeline for how long the recovery process will take.”

**Write to** Tawnell D. Hobbs at [Tawnell.Hobbs@wsj.com](mailto:Tawnell.Hobbs@wsj.com) and Melissa Korn at [melissa.korn@wsj.com](mailto:melissa.korn@wsj.com)

*Appeared in the September 5, 2017, print edition as ‘Flood Damage Delays the Start of School Year.’*