

Challenges are just beginning for some Western NC schools after Helene

BY REBECCA NOEL
rnoel@charlotteobserver.com

Michael Luplow stood in front of FernLeaf Community Charter School two weeks ago, feeling optimistic. He thought the school had been spared the worst of Hurricane Helene.

But in less than 24 hours, the school – and his life’s work – would be swept clean off its foundation.

“It was absolutely heart-breaking,” he said of the school he launched in 2016 in Fletcher. “The Creek campus has been a big part of our identity from the beginning.”

The campus in Henderson County sits surrounded by Cane Creek, where students in kindergarten through fourth grade would go for outdoor learning during the week. It’s flooded before – but nothing like this. Outdoor learning spaces and athletic fields were washed away, and each of the campus’s three buildings became unusable as 5 feet of water crept up the walls.

“The shared experience of watching the loss of this space is creating real, intense feelings for all of us,” Luplow said.

FernLeaf is slated to begin classes again Oct. 16, but other nearby school districts will need more time. They’re racing to get access to running water and get kids back in the classroom. And parents can’t help but wonder

whether this break from school might be as devastating for student learning as COVID.

Immediately after the storm, Luplow began trying to contact staff – a tall task when few people in the region had cell phone or internet service. They reached out via email, text, phone calls and, eventually, contacting neighbors and friends until they confirmed all staff and students were safe and accounted for.

“The two happiest days were when they told us that every staff member had been accounted for and then the day when they told us every student had been accounted for,” said Lisa Spalding, a third grade teacher at FernLeaf. Spalding says most staff members, including herself, still lack running water.

But not all is lost. The school has a second campus for middle and high school that 430 elementary school students will now share.

“We’ve been able to put together a really solid plan to allow for the least amount of disruption,” Luplow said. “We are incredibly fortunate that we have been building our facilities to accommodate growth, so we have some flexibility.”

Luplow still feels a personal connection to the Creek campus, but after Helene, he’s hesitant to rebuild there.

“I would love to see us rebuild the Creek campus because it is such an in-

tegral part of who we are, but we’re conscious that storms of this magnitude are on the rise,” he said. “We know that what makes us who we are are the people.”

WHAT’S THE DAMAGE

Buncombe County Schools, the largest public district in the region and 13th largest in the state, aims to reopen its campuses “as quickly as possible,” but only 40 out of 45 schools had power as of Wednesday afternoon. Only 13 had running water.

“We’ve looked at every viable option we could imagine for the safest and quickest solution to get students back in school,” Buncombe County Schools Superintendent Rob Jackson said at a community briefing Wednesday. “We’ve looked into sharing buildings that do have power and water, looked into partial day schedules and bussing students across the county.”

The district, along with Asheville City Schools, is even considering assembling “flush brigades” of community volunteers to carry non-potable water to schools throughout the day to supply and flush their toilets. Both districts said they’re ordering portable toilet trailers, though delivery dates have not been announced.

None of Buncombe County’s campuses sustained catastrophic structural damage. Some classrooms need carpet re-

placed and one school saw flooding in its boiler room. Maintenance and facilities crews started repairs and removing downed tree limbs and debris blocking entrances, Chief Communications Officer Ken Ulmer told The Charlotte Observer.

Once some internet and cell service started returning, teachers, administrators and other staff teamed up to try to contact families and educators. As of Wednesday, the district had made contact with 100% of its staff and 98% of families.

“Communication continues to be challenging, but we’re connecting with students everyday,” Ulmer said. “I was able to connect to a student while I was at a water distribution site. We had several schools where teachers found spots where they had cell service and started calling.”

Asheville City Schools initially announced it would close indefinitely, but Superintendent Maggie Furman said Wednesday the district wants to bring students back Oct. 28. It’s drilling wells at each of its schools.

“While the city continues to make progress with the municipal water system, we can’t wait until it is fully repaired to open our schools,” Furman said Wednesday. “Yesterday, we began drilling a well at Hall Fletcher Elementary School and were able to hit groundwater.”

She cautioned that it will still take two to three

weeks before the district can start using that water in its buildings.

“I felt immense relief that there is some kind of timeline being announced because, at first, there was messaging that suggested we could be out for weeks and weeks,” said Liz Tallent, a parent to two second-graders and one sixth-grader in Asheville City Schools. “There was basically a 100% communication blackout. It was really like we were transported to another era.”

Tallent says she worries for teachers, most of whom still don’t have water in their homes.

“I would almost call teachers first responders in this situation because they’re having to make these huge sacrifices and get back to work for the sake of the rest of us,” she said. “It really highlights the importance of schools. When there’s no school, the whole community is at a standstill.”

‘DÉJÀ VU’

North Carolina has strict laws in place for when the school year can start and end as well as how many remote learning days are permitted. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt announced she’s requesting more flexibility for school districts after Helene from the General Assembly, including the ability to continue the school year past mid-June.

Tallent’s sixth-grader was in first grade when the pandemic hit in 2020. She said Helene’s damage feels similar – life grinding to a halt yet again in the face of a disaster.

“It really feels like déjà vu,” she said. “I’m putting some of those lessons that I learned during the pandemic into practice now, which is not something I really thought I’d have to do again. I think I’m kind

of in shock.”

She’s concerned about learning loss like kids saw during the pandemic, which schools are still recovering from. She’s finding opportunities for her kids to do lessons with teachers. But she’s worried for people who don’t have those opportunities.

“This kind of thing, just like the pandemic, exacerbates the difference between those who have the resources and the bandwidth and those who don’t,” Tallent said. “It just widens the inequities that Asheville already struggles with.”

Luplow said parents at his school are echoing some of Tallent’s concerns.

“Parents are still reeling from some of the experiences from COVID,” Luplow said. “They’re concerned about learning loss.”

PULLING TOGETHER

Luplow and Tallent said their communities have sprung into action, volunteering to clear away road blockages, clean rivers and get resources to people who need them most.

“With that heartbreak, also there’s immediately been a sense of hope and optimism and opportunities to rebuild,” said Luplow. “It’s been astounding to watch.”

Luplow said schools across the country have sent loads of school supplies to FernLeaf. Tallent said parents in her community have set up a GoFundMe for teachers in her area who may need help covering the cost of home repairs.

Still, they say, it will take years to fully recover.

“I think it’s important for our community and the broader community to understand the true impact of this storm,” Luplow said. “We need all the help we can get.”

Start your wellness journey.

There's no better time than today.

Welcome to the Well, your resource for expert insights on all things health and wellness. Explore research-driven articles that will empower you to build positive, sustainable habits. From fitness and nutrition to senior wellness and family development, find articles to guide you at every stage of your journey.

Holistic Health Practices

Sustainable Lifestyle Habits

Exercise and Fitness Trends

Nutrition Tips and Ideas

Time to meet a healthier, happier you. Explore, learn and thrive with The Well.
Scan the QR to get started.

The Charlotte Observer

EMPOWER

Your Voice

NEWSLETTER ARTICLES ARE FREE TO ACCESS!

As an informed advocate, you know that knowledge is power. Our newsletter is your trusted source for well-researched, balanced political analysis that keeps you ahead of the curve. Whether you’re engaging in local discussions, contributing to national debates, or advocating for social justice, we provide the quick summaries and in-depth insights you need to stay informed and make a difference. Stay connected to the issues that matter, and empower your voice in the political conversation.

Subscribe today and be a part of the change.

Scan the QR code

Stay Informed. Stay Engaged. Shape the Future.