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State Superintendent Praises Division Recovery Efforts *New School Year Begins After Series of Natural Disasters*

Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright today thanked school divisions for their efforts in response to a series of natural disasters and emergencies in April and August that damaged schools, interrupted instruction and complicated operations in dozens of divisions.

“I can’t think of another time during my 35 years as an educator when the public schools of Virginia have faced so many unexpected challenges in so short a period of time,” Wright said. “I want to thank the superintendents, principals, administrators, teachers, support staff and parents for everything they have done in the face of extraordinary circumstances to protect students and staff from serious injury, minimize disruptions to instruction and provide children with safe learning environments.”

The 2010-2011 school year drew to a close in the spring with school divisions at opposite ends of the state coping with severe tornado damage to school buildings. The 2011-2012 school year is getting under way amid the destruction and aftereffects of a historic earthquake in central Virginia, a devastating fire and a hurricane that spread tropical storm-force winds over a broad area of the state. The following chronology includes some — but not all — of the impacted schools and school divisions:

- April 16 — Tornado destroys roof of Page Middle in Gloucester County; 6th-grade and 7th-grade students complete 2010-2011 and begin the new school year at Peasley Middle; 8th-graders complete year and begin 2011-2012 in modular classrooms at Gloucester High.
- April 28 — Tornado destroys roof of Glade Spring Middle in Washington County. Hail from storm shreds roofs of Valley Institute Elementary in Washington County, and Highland View Elementary and Van Pelt Elementary in Bristol. Repairs to schools in both divisions completed over the summer.
- August 13 — Fire guts Meadows of Dan Elementary in Patrick County. After a one-day closure, instruction resumes in makeshift classrooms in the school gymnasium. Site preparation is under way to accommodate 14 modular classrooms purchased from Powhatan County for \$1 each. Students and teachers in other Virginia school divisions are raising funds and collecting supplies to help Meadows of Dan Elementary students and staff recover from the fire.
- August 23 — Earthquake causes structural damage to Louisa County High and Thomas Jefferson Elementary in Louisa County. Displaced high school students and middle school students and staff will share Louisa County Middle School on an alternating schedule until January. Thomas Jefferson Elementary students and staff will be moved into mobile classrooms at Trevilians Elementary. Schools in Orange County also are damaged by the 5.8 earthquake and both Orange County and Louisa County are delaying the start of school until September 12 to allow for safety inspections and repairs.
- August 27 — Hurricane Irene disrupts back-to-school preparations throughout eastern and central Virginia. Prolonged power outages delay the return of teachers, and in several divisions, the return of students. In New Kent County, Irene’s winds caused roof damage to George Watkins Elementary. New Kent County is one of several divisions delaying the beginning of school to allow for the restoration of power to schools and residents.

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During and after the storm, school buildings in impacted localities serve as emergency shelters and relief centers. For example:

- In Accomack County on the Eastern Shore, more than 1,000 evacuated residents rode out the storm in shelters at Arcadia Middle, Nandua Middle, Arcadia High and Nandua High. In Northampton County, more than 200 residents took shelter in Northampton High.
- On the Northern Neck, Northumberland High in Northumberland County served as an emergency shelter during the hurricane and, during recovery efforts, as a Red Cross relief center and a dormitory for out-of-state power crews. Northumberland County Public Schools also is providing water to Northern Neck residents. Schools in King and Queen County on the Middle Peninsula also served as emergency relief centers during and after the hurricane.

“All of these challenges have tested the leadership of the affected school divisions, and in every instance, the responses of superintendents, administrators and principals have been characterized by resourcefulness, ingenuity and a determination to minimize the impact on instruction and student learning,” Wright said. “School divisions have reached out to each other during these disasters and emergencies to render assistance and have provided critical support to local, state and national emergency management and relief agencies.”

Wright also thanked local governing bodies and officials for providing the financial support school divisions need to recover from emergencies and natural disasters.

“From one end of the commonwealth to the other, communities have rallied around their public schools,” Wright said. “This ‘can do’ spirit is getting the new school year off to a good start — despite the challenges some divisions still face.”

Virginia Department of Education staff are providing technical guidance to school divisions affected by the most recent events — the earthquake and hurricane — as they adjust school calendars and schedules while ensuring that state requirements for instructional time are met.

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