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Recovery and healing in our schools and community

By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

It is heartening to see the daily progress in ways large and small in the Montecito community. We know there is a long way to go, but the direction is positive and promising. As I listen to the community and talk with residents of Santa Barbara County, a common theme has emerged: the desire to help.

In fact, help has already been delivered by many people, from first responders, to neighbors who opened their homes to displaced Montecito residents, to colleagues and friends giving grace and space to those who need time to get their bearings.

Help has been offered from throughout our county. In North County, people have asked me how they could provide support, be it social and emotional assistance for students and staff, donations of clothing and supplies, or financial aid. Residents of Cuyama, who rely on Highway 166, were inundated with traffic rerouted through their small community. However, the people I visited in Cuyama gave little thought to any inconvenience they experienced during that period, and instead expressed grave concern and deep sympathy for their neighbors in the South.

A general thank you is in order for those who have helped in ways large and small. Every effort has made a significant difference. Other ways to lend support will continue to emerge.

One bright light in these past few weeks is that each local school district responded as a community for its students, parents, and employees. Teachers, staff, and administrators did all they could to get to their sites, making school a comforting and welcoming place for their students, and acting on the knowledge that routine and the comfort of normalcy is very important for children. Parents played an enormous role in keeping their families focused in a positive direction. They have supported their children and their schools at every turn.

We are mindful that teachers and staff have been tending to multiple needs simultaneously: they have been rising above the tragedy and staying strong for the children, nurturing the students

who are entrusted to them each day, and also planning lessons that get back to instruction without overwhelming the system. Yet teachers and staff need nurturing, too.

Hundreds of school personnel traveled on trains, boats, buses, and undertook hours-long detours to get to their schools and their students. They all talked about how grateful they were to see their students during and after the tragedy. When I visited Cold Spring, Montecito Union, and Carpinteria school districts recently — those most directly hit by tragedy — I heard first-hand from teachers and staff about the joy they felt at the sights and sounds of children playing, laughing, and learning together once again.

But when I was able to talk directly to teachers or staff members one-on-one, their abiding concern for the children was clear. They are aware of how long the healing process will be.

Teaching has always been a balance between an academic focus and an awareness of the emotional challenges our students face. Those challenges exist among children in every corner of our county and have impacts in every classroom. We are so grateful that we have such caring and dedicated teachers. We know that attitude of caring and service that was demonstrated after this recent tragedy is replicated in classrooms countywide.

Our unending sympathy goes to all who suffered so greatly. We also thank all of those who have provided or offered assistance, and all the parents and friends who have worked so hard to keep our families strong. Finally, we remain grateful for teachers and staff members who will continue to navigate the challenges faced by their students in the aftermath of disaster. With a spirit of compassion, determination, and optimism, we will move forward as a community, with our eyes focused on a brighter future.

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