

KATRINA AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Schools as buildings are a legacy of history. Schools as places to learn are the promise of the future.

It would be impossible for any teacher not to think about the tens of thousands of school children displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Buildings were destroyed, infrastructure disrupted, children made homeless, and teachers displaced. The sad events are still being reported by the media.

One story, not as widely read, was reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Jeffrey Young. Under the title, “Displaced Students Receive Offer of Online Courses,” Young wrote about the offer of free online courses made by a group of universities to those displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Only time will tell if the offer was successful—the major problem reported in the article was contacting potential students—but certainly the concept of schools as places where teaching and learning occur, and not just physical locations, was behind the generous offer of the universities reported on in Young’s article.

“If ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ were candy and nuts, we would all have a Happy Holiday,” the old line goes. And, if all schools had vibrant and active online virtual classes, then the school could actually be an idea more than a building.

Here is way to make it happen:

1. Establish distance education as a critical component for educating in the community, college, or organization.
2. Identify and empower a planning group that includes managers and leaders from the constituencies to be affected by distance education
3. Create a clear and mutually shared vision for distance education in the schools, in the college, or in the training organization.
4. Communicate the vision widely and clearly.
5. Provide authority and power to those who act on the vision.
6. Identify activities that will show immediately and in the short term, the potential for distance education.
7. Collect and identify distance education success stories and acquire the artifacts of these successes.
8. Expand the successes and build a comprehensive program.

Obviously, this short list leaves out a wealth of details and specifics. Think about this, however: in many communities there are active

movements to make the entire community a WiFi zone—a hot zone—where high speed Internet access is available, just as clean water, sewage disposal, electrical power, and trash collection are available to everyone. Access to information is becoming a necessary utility. When this happens, not *if* this happens, the virtual school becomes possible.

In the South, hurricanes are the problem. In the north, it is the snow storm. Would it not be

nice if some day this announcement went out in a typical Iowa community? “School will not be open tomorrow because of the forecasted snow storm. Virtual school will begin at 8:45.”

REFERENCE

Young, J. (2005, September 13). Displaced students receive offer of online courses. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A41.