

Our (Extra)ordinary Public Schools

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Sometimes the lines between the ordinary and extraordinary can blur, as in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, when everyday and exceptional acts often were intertwined.

The day students returned to New York City schools after the storm, I visited several schools in the Rockaways. Entire neighborhoods looked like they had been bombed. Pervasive gas shortages, electrical outages and debris made simply getting to the schools that were able to open a treacherous obstacle course for students, staff and volunteers alike.

Once there, teachers resumed their roles of nurturing and teaching students, but this was uncharted territory. Teachers now were tending to students who were traumatized, many whose homes had been destroyed, and some who had lost loved ones. Thousands of families are still displaced.

Many educators whose schools were too damaged to reopen were busy creating makeshift classrooms in temporary space. Even paperwork took on a new dimension. So much had been destroyed that teachers set about right away applying to FEMA, insurance companies and charities to secure the basic materials their students needed.

As I entered August Martin High School, which housed several displaced schools, teachers from P.S. 317 were rushing out. They had just learned they could return to their classrooms to try to salvage materials for their students, and they invited me to come along. School staff had also created a distribution center in front of P.S. 317 and were providing clothing, baby supplies and other necessities. Some, anxious about students who were unaccounted for, went door to door to check on them. Every school employee I spoke with was focused on restoring some sense of normalcy for their students. Time and again, the ordinary met the extraordinary.

Many of those on the frontlines have lost so much themselves. That's true of many first responders, municipal and healthcare workers, and educators. One New York City teacher lost her home in the storm, yet didn't miss a day of work with her students and

even was part of a fundraising effort to help others. Indeed, the circle of virtue grew ever-larger in the days and weeks after the storm. Educators from Schoharie County in upstate New York, who were helped by UFT volunteers when Hurricane Irene hit last year, showed their gratitude by helping clear out and rebuild homes on Staten Island.

Children should be able to count on home and school to provide stability in their lives. That's why UFT president Michael Mulgrew organized relief efforts even before the Red Cross or anyone else had reached some devastated areas. That's why members of the American Federation of Teachers from Connecticut, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., joined the UFT's efforts in

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Coney Island, the Rockaways and Staten Island, and also helped fill 30,000 backpacks with school supplies and other necessities for students affected by the storm. That's why teachers in hard-hit areas in New Jersey and Long Island served Thanksgiving dinners to students and their families, nourishing

and nurturing them. That's why the New York City teacher pension fund just announced a \$1 billion investment in post-Sandy reconstruction and other critical infrastructure projects. And that's why Congress must avert more devastation to the region by acting quickly on President Obama's request for \$60 billion in relief.

Public schools are centers of community and civic life—some serving, in the same week, as shelters for the displaced and polling places where community members voted. Public schooling fosters our common identity as Americans sharing a land of diversity. It promotes the American ideal of opportunity for all, not just some. It cultivates the civic values of respecting individuals as well as collective responsibility.

Such wonderful things happen on an "ordinary" basis—the daily work of educators in our public schools to prepare students to be innovators, caretakers of the environment, tenders of our global relationships, guardians of our prosperity and creators of our arts. And they are evident during extraordinary times—in the aftermath of a "superstorm" or the terrorist attacks on 9/11. While some may still put testing above teaching, and closing schools (thus destabilizing neighborhoods) above fixing schools and bringing communities together, Sandy's aftermath is a powerful reminder that, every day in our public schools, ordinary and extraordinary acts take place.

To contribute to the AFT Disaster Relief Fund, go to <http://go.aft.org/sandyrelief>.



AFT president Randi Weingarten joins relief efforts in Coney Island.

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