



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, May 18, 2016

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TETON SCHOOL DISTRICT PREPARES AND PLANS, BECOMES A STORMREADY SUPPORTER

(BOISE) – Educators often look beyond just their classrooms to the role they play in the entire community. In the Teton County School District that means taking part in county disaster planning, an effort that led recently to a National Weather Service (NWS) designation as a StormReady Supporter.

StormReady is a program designed by NOAA’s National Weather Service to establish severe weather safety plans, enhance communication, and actively promote weather awareness. Teton County School District is the first school district in Idaho to receive StormReady Supporter recognition.

The special designation began when district Superintendent Monte Woolstenhulme attended the meetings of the county’s Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), a group that meets on a regular basis to review and update various disaster contingency plans. “We’re a component of the county Emergency Operations Plan,” Woolstenhulme said. Representatives of the NWS office in Pocatello occasionally join the group.

To earn the StormReady Supporter designation, the district completed several steps to strengthen communication channels between their emergency operations staff, bus drivers, and the National Weather Service. They implemented weather safety measures for their staff, and developed coordination plans to ensure public safety within their facilities.

As part of updating the district’s own Emergency Operations Plan, Woolstenhulme took what he learned at the LEPC meetings from the NWS representatives and began a major upgrade of how the district would react in a weather emergency. Originally focused just on “teachers, kids and schools,” the district’s plan, developed using a committee of both staff and parents, was now fully integrated into the county plan.

In Driggs and Teton County, winter snowstorms are the most likely natural disaster to occur in the area, with snow sometimes blocking outlying roads, requiring changes in bus routes or alternative accommodations for students. But Woolstenhulme recognized that techniques for dealing with those issues could go beyond a bad snowstorm.

In any disaster, communications are a vital factor in helping officials coordinate resources and inform the public. The district can utilize updates on its website and Facebook pages, plus text messaging systems.

“Not only can we send texts to everyone in the district, but we now can narrow it to (parents of students on) specific bus routes, if they’ve been affected.” The ability to focus messages to targeted households in specific geographic areas can be enormously useful in any emergency, Woolstenhulme noted.

In addition, principals also now have the ability to contact individual buses directly, receiving



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reports on status or even warning them of problems ahead.

The plan also establishes priorities for responses. “A few years ago,” Woolstenhulme said, “we had a problem with one of our older elementary schools. It was a very cold morning and the coal furnace backed up, filling the school with coal dust and smoke. We got the students evacuated to an adjacent church and then called the Fire Department to help ventilate the building.

“But we realized that what we should have done, and it’s part of our plan now, is call the Fire Department immediately while we start the evacuation, then start sending text messages out to parents. If somebody drives by a school and sees a bunch of fire trucks out front, you never know what kind of rumors are going to start flying around. You need to get the message out to parents right away.”

In the Teton district, disaster planning is more than just words on paper. School safety drills involve not only the staff at a school, but the students as well. Local emergency responders, police, fire and ambulance crews, also often take part in the drills. “The kids get used to seeing firemen and police, so it’s not so traumatizing to them,” Woolstenhulme stated.

Getting realistic drills with everyone involved is made easier by Woolstenhulme’s participation in the county LEPC, where he noted that the district’s practices, procedures, and communication plans can be used for other purposes. “Maybe we’d need to evacuate some people due to a storm or a fire, and we’d need to use a school as an evacuation center. Our plans, our abilities, tie in nicely with the county (disaster planners).”

Going after the StormReady Supporter designation from the NWS helped polish the district emergency plans. “The StormReady program is a great approach for us to develop plans to handle severe weather,” said Woolstenhulme. “Through the StormReady program, our school district developed a robust partnership with the National Weather Service and, most importantly, improved the safety of the students and our employees.

“You hope things like this never happen, but I think we’re as prepared as anyone can be if it does.”

“Across eastern Idaho, our natural environment and diverse terrain come coupled with severe weather risks—especially from blizzards, flooding and damaging winds from severe thunderstorms. These risks require constant communication with community officials and first responders year round,” said Dean Hazen, meteorologist-in-charge of the NWS forecast office in Pocatello. “The StormReady process arms us with improved communication and safety skills needed to save lives and property – before and during a weather event.”

The StormReady community preparedness program uses a grassroots approach to help communities develop plans to handle local severe weather and flooding threats. The program is voluntary and provides communities with clear-cut advice from a partnership between local NWS forecast offices and state and local emergency managers. For more information about the program, contact the nearest National Weather Service office.

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Photo: During the StormReady Supporter presentation are, from left: Brody Birch, assistant principal and athletic director for Teton High School, Superintendent Monte Woolstenhulme, Frank Mello, principal of Teton High School, Dan Valle of the National Weather Service, and Greg Adams, Teton County Emergency Management coordinator.