

## ■ Advice for principals and teachers 2: Getting ready for the return of students

One recurring theme across all my studies was that schools were not just places of education but very often, especially in small communities, a hub of their community. This meant that post-disaster, communities looked to schools as places of support and sanctuary and at principals and teachers as people with wise advice (even if that was not how they thought about themselves). The point is that you might face other unexpected demands on your time and energy in a post-disaster context. Here are some things that other schools found useful:

- If the school is unscathed or only needs limited repairs or a tidy up, organising a community picnic/working bee is a useful way to bring a community together and for students and parents to feel that going back to school is a new beginning.
- If you are going to have to work in a temporary, shared or unfamiliar location, the same applies. Having an open day or setting-up get-together enables parents and students to not be so shocked or upset when they arrive on their first day.
- Having a space available, such as a spare classroom, the library or school hall available for parents and other community members to meet, talk over a coffee, bring their toddlers, cry or hug, made school feel like a place where families were welcomed.
- Some schools offered wider services such hosting counselling, health or financial services on their premises or setting up laundry facilities, clothing swaps or a practical help service (I can mind children if someone helps fix my roof...).
- When students came back to school many found comfort in familiar things – their friends, their teachers, their classrooms, the school grounds. Give them time to reacquaint themselves with these aspects and provide time to catch up with each other.
- This is not the time to make too many changes. Familiar routines, such as times for classes and breaks, doing school-type things (such as assembly, writing, reading, listening to stories, playing games) helped students feel that, amid the chaos, something was still normal (even if within these routines the activities were more relaxed).
- Keeping up communication with families and the community about what you are doing and why is important at this time. As is updating important information about contact details and procedures for future events.
- Each school will be different. Some will be mourning the death of students or family members; some will be feeling relieved that their community was spared. Each school needs to find a way to move forward that reflects the experiences and needs of their students and the community.

This information is supplied by Professor Carol Mutch (from the University of Auckland), a researcher in disaster response and recovery from her own work and the research and advice of other experts in the field. It is designed to provide a general overview and might need adaptation for individual circumstances.