



CASE STUDY

Boulder Valley School District: Building Resilience After a Natural Disaster

A case study on how one Colorado school district navigated crisis response, mental health support, and community rebuilding during devastating natural disasters, with specific attention to the 2021 Colorado Marshall Fires, one of the most destructive wildfires in Colorado history.



Superintendent Rob Anderson looks over a neighborhood where the Marshall Fire destroyed homes.

“ The night of the Marshall Fire, we went from having a handful of homeless students to having more than 1,500.
Superintendent Rob Anderson

Background

Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) serves approximately 28,000 students across 56 schools in Boulder County, Colorado. Spanning 500 square miles, the district encompasses urban, suburban, and rural environments across 11 communities. Due to its location, BVSD faces unique challenges related to natural disasters, including destructive wildfires and severe floods.

28,000
STUDENTS

56
SCHOOLS

500
SQUARE MILES

11
COMMUNITIES

The Marshall Fires



BURNED
6,000
ACRES



DESTROYED
1,000
STRUCTURES



DISPLACED
37,500
PEOPLE

The Challenge: Responding to Unprecedented Disasters

In December 2021, the Marshall Fires devastated Boulder County, burning over 6,000 acres, destroying nearly 1,000 structures, and forcing the evacuation of more than 37,500 people. The impact on BVSD was profound.

The district faced multiple challenges simultaneously:

- > Ensuring student and staff safety
- > Providing immediate support for displaced families
- > Addressing trauma and grief among students and staff
- > Maintaining educational continuity
- > Balancing staff well-being with operational needs

BVSD's Comprehensive Approach to Crisis Management During a Natural Disaster

1. Establishing a Dedicated Trauma Response Team

Recognizing the growing need for mental health support following crises, BVSD created a specialized Trauma Response Team designed to provide immediate support to those impacted by tragedies.

Structure and Training:

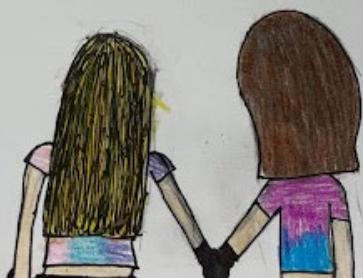
- > The district is divided into three networks, each with four specialized teams
- > Each team includes mental health advocates, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, and community liaisons
- > All team members receive training in [PREPaRE](#), an evidence-based trauma response curriculum developed by the National Association of School Psychologists

“The team’s purpose is to provide immediate support to those impacted by tragedies, whether they involve the loss of a student or teacher, major traumatic events, or widespread natural disasters.”

*Tammy Lawrence, Katie McGee, and MaryErin Rossin
(BVSD Trauma Response Team)*

It's ok to not be ok

Student art created after the Marshall Fires in BoulderValley



Superintendent Rob Anderson speaks with the staff at Lafayette Elementary.

2. Immediate Crisis Response Strategies

When the Marshall Fires struck, BVSD implemented a three-pronged immediate response:



Communication and Safety Information:

- > Activated communication systems including website and social media
- > Provided real-time updates about the situation
- > Created clear, consistent communication channels for families



Mental Health Support Mobilization:

- > Quickly established counseling centers at the district office and 11 schools in affected areas
- > Deployed trauma response teams to schools not directly affected
- > Offered support for students processing fear and anxiety



Community Partner Coordination:

- > Connected with Boulder County's Office of Emergency Management
- > Collaborated with local shelters and organizations like the American Red Cross
- > Worked with Mental Health Partners (now [Clinica Family Health and Wellness](#))

3. Supporting Students Through Grief and Trauma

BVSD recognized that addressing the emotional and psychological impact of disasters was essential for student recovery.

Multi-layered Support Framework:

- **Immediate Counseling:** Mobilized counselors and mental health professionals to meet with directly impacted students
- **Safe Spaces:** Created quiet, supportive areas within schools where students could retreat
- **Peer Support Groups:** Established trauma rooms and wellness centers where students could connect with others experiencing similar grief
- **Family Support Services:** Offered resources for parents on recognizing trauma signs and supporting family well-being



Superintendent Rob Anderson visits students at Mapleton Early Childhood Center.

“ We recognized the need for spaces where students could retreat and feel safe... These areas were designed to give students a break from the classroom, offering them a refuge where they could relax and engage with mental health professionals.

*Tammy Lawrence, Katie McGee, and MaryErin Rossin
(BVSD Trauma Response Team)*

4. Balancing Academic Needs with Emotional Support

The district implemented a thoughtful approach to maintaining educational continuity while addressing emotional needs:

Curriculum Adjustments:

- Modified academic demands to meet students' emotional state
- Provided flexible transitions back to the classroom

SEL Integration:

- Incorporated Social-Emotional Learning into curriculum
- Focused on building resilience and emotional regulation skills

Gradual Re-entry:

- Implemented phased approach to returning to full academic tasks
- Offered flexibility for students most deeply affected



Superintendent Rob Anderson speaks to senior staff during future learning exercise.



Superintendent Rob Anderson at pandemic press conference.

“During a crisis, people need leadership more than ever. It takes extra energy, extra focus, extra care, extra attention to detail. As the leader, it is important to first mentally prepare yourself. When a crisis happens, steady yourself and get your team ready to respond.

Superintendent Rob Anderson

5. Leadership Principles and Strategies

Superintendent Rob Anderson emphasizes several critical aspects of crisis leadership:

Key leadership principles include:



Communication and Empathy:

Create a strategic cadence for information sharing and demonstrate genuine care



Decision-Making:

Develop clear plans and have the courage to stand behind difficult decisions



Partnership Utilization:

Reach out to trusted partners early and accept help



Long-Term Vision:

Recognize that recovery extends far beyond the immediate aftermath

“It is important to connect with people directly with a level of responsiveness and empathy.

Superintendent Rob Anderson

Key Takeaways for District Leaders

Building Your Trauma Response Capabilities

- 1 **Recruit Committed Staff:** Build a team of skilled and passionate professionals committed to providing mental health support
- 2 **Invest in Training:** Equip staff with trauma-informed care skills through evidence-based programs like PREPaRE
- 3 **Form Strong Partnerships:** Establish relationships with local mental health organizations, first responders, and community leaders before crises occur
- 4 **Create Clear Communication Plans:** Develop reliable communication systems and templates for rapid response
- 5 **Stay Flexible and Focus on Long-Term Recovery:** Adapt to each unique situation while providing ongoing support

Leading Through Crisis

- 1 **Prepare Mentally:** Steady yourself before leading your team through difficult circumstances
- 2 **Balance Communication:** Provide critical information without overwhelming families and staff
- 3 **Show Empathy:** Connect directly with affected community members to provide reassurance
- 4 **Make Principled Decisions:** Stand behind difficult choices that align with your district's core values
- 5 **Accept Help:** Leverage community partners and delegate when possible to maintain focus
- 6 **Plan for Extended Recovery:** Recognize that impact continues long after the immediate crisis subsides

Resources



Student art at Fireside Elementary School in BVSD

BVSD developed numerous resources for supporting their community through a natural disaster and other crises:

- Trauma Response Resources for Staff
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PJHLejMR5-INh3WdEatrq8W6fP6aCXH9CrTGbtyrjTY/edit?usp=sharing>
- Wildfire – Administrator Resource & Tips for Talking to Students
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pRtNYzJ5xXsTEUMTCXWmyGwL3MvDh4MtgO00Bh9OUos/edit?usp=sharing>
- Tips When Talking to Students: Resource for Teachers/Parents
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fsEp2NcmjICrz2k0fu_CxBpYIJRSCdA0tvqzrj1Zxl/edit?usp=sharing
- Tips for Talking to Our Students – An Educator’s Guide:
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1RHK6yPhxD3BZ8BOQzj314FLAupYt9lrQKVjMy64V8/edit?usp=sharing>
- Video: Tips for Taking Care of Self and Talking Students
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kA5aSEfLejN3WD0guldgtURwVOUTICX3/view>
- Prompts for Supporting Students
https://drive.google.com/file/d/107wzjuRibGYwkqAcM_Gjj6VuO701k-F/view?usp=sharing
- BVSD Marshall Fire Resource List
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LRtDDVyFZQAbayQyo9Dq77-yCKp5iXwHWaRFm8U0wE/edit?usp=sharing>
- Outside Source: Center for Resilience & Wellbeing Marshall Fire Resource Page
<https://ibsweb.colorado.edu/crw/marshall-fire-resources/>

AASA Blog Posts and Articles featuring BVSD

- Blog Post: Boulder Valley Strong: Building Resilience and Support During Natural Disasters
<https://www.aasa.org/resources/blog/boulder-valley-strong-building-resilience-and-support-during-natural-disasters>
- Blog Post: Boulder Valley Strong: Responding to the Marshall Fires
<https://www.aasa.org/resources/blog/boulder-valley-strong-responding-to-the-marshall-fires>
- Blog Post: Boulder Valley Strong: Navigating Grief and Trauma During the Marshall Fires
<https://www.aasa.org/resources/blog/boulder-valley-strong-insights-from-a-superintendent>
- Blog Post: Boulder Valley Strong: Insights from a Colorado Superintendent on Leading During Crises
<https://www.aasa.org/resources/blog/boulder-valley-strong-navigating-grief-and-trauma-after-the-marshall-fires>
- *School Administrator* magazine article: Steering Through Tragedy and Disasters
<https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/steering-through-disasters-and-tragedy>



Superintendent Rob Anderson poses for a photo with the BVSD students who participated in Public Education Day at the Capitol.

Conclusion

Boulder Valley School District’s experience navigating natural disasters offers valuable lessons for education leaders. By developing comprehensive trauma response systems, prioritizing mental health, and maintaining strong community partnerships, districts can build resilience that serves them well during crises.

As Superintendent Anderson reflects:

“ Sure, a lot of what we do as leaders is at the 30,000 foot level, but sometimes you’ve got to be on the ground – giving people who have lost their homes a hug or giving a caring call to ask how we can help. It is important to tell people that it is going to be okay and we are here to support you.



This case study was developed based on Boulder Valley School District’s four-part blog series published by AASA “Boulder Valley Strong” documenting their experiences navigating natural disasters while building community resilience.

www.aasa.org



AASA’s Schools of Thought blog offers district leaders inspiration and actionable strategies to foster impactful change. Read the latest stories and learn how you can contribute at aasa.org/blog