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When schools go dark during PG&E outages

By Ania Keenan



Acalanes Union High School District Office in Lafayette. Photo Ania Keenan

The Acalanes Union High School District on Oct. 29 sent out a message to parents and students at Miramonte, Campolindo, and Acalanes high schools announcing that they had decided to keep schools open the following day despite power outages and poor air quality in the preceding three days. At the time the message was sent many students and staff had been without power for up to 72 hours, many without cell service and hot water.

"We were confident we could provide a safe learning environment," Acalanes Union District superintendent John Nickerson said.

After securing communication lines with local law enforcement, superintendents from Acalanes, Orinda Union, Lafayette and Walnut Creek school districts worked together to begin the long process of conference calls and group meetings to form a game plan for if and when the power was shut off at their schools.

"It's a work group, five educational leaders, who are trying to solve similar challenges and so we are exchanging ideas," Nickerson said.

School districts in California are required by state code to keep schools open for 180 days out of the year. With no alternative days for weather obstructions, if time is taken off for instances of power outages or poor air quality for a time of longer than three days, the school is forced to cut into other sanctioned days, these include teacher preparation days. Keeping this in mind the superintendents worked with Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette police departments to establish guidelines for what would constitute safety for students and staff and what would be the bottom line for schools to be open or closed. Among those key factors were running water, lighting, air quality, communication and emergency preparedness.

If schools are without running water for more than a few hours, the district is obliged to close them. This also applies to a certain amount of lighting and especially to the ability of the administration to communicate with law enforcement. There is additional concern related to air quality. During the outages the district largely relied on "Purple Air" to give them quick updates on changing conditions. They also have access to a more scientific system, "Air Now," but the hour delay in their ratings proved too long.

Despite plans set in place, lack of cell service, Nickerson admits, posed a challenge for the districts. "To deal with this obstacle the district relied on the stable connection of one administrative officer per high school." So far the district does not have plans to establish more concrete forms of communication during an outage that affects cell service.

An additional challenge posed by the latest set of shutdowns was emergency preparedness and evacuation plans. With limited communication, schools across the districts were directed to establish "Fire Watch Protocols." Many students saw administrative personnel and teachers roaming the halls Monday through Wednesday the week of Oct. 28, some with bullhorns, all carrying whistles and wearing bright reflective jackets. Many were given protective gas masks. These were the members of the "Fire Watch." Stationed at positions around campus, these staff members were instructed to keep tabs on nearby classrooms and watch for changes in dangerous weather patterns, namely fires as the name indicates. If they spotted something of concern members would communicate with each other on short-range walkie-talkies they had connected. If said weather concern was dangerous enough or close enough to the school to warrant an evacuation, it would be on the one administrative official with cell service to notify the superintendent who would have promptly notified law enforcement.

While emergency communication poses challenges, updates on the status of power went smoothly due to the districts' access to local law enforcement's special connection to PG&E updates.

Another hurdle for local schools was the requirement to provide school lunches for students who needed them. With short notice the district decided to outsource and bring in pizza for students from a vendor not affected by the outages.

While the California education board has proven to be flexible in the past when schools don't meet their 180 days of instruction due to fire and power conditions, with no current designations in the calendar for "outage or fire days" the state of school operations during the outages may be the new normal for Bay Area students during annual fire season.

Nickerson would like to keep that from happening. "The state has suggested that this is not a long-term solution and ultimately you might need to have something like a weather day or a 'snow day' like other regions have," Nickerson said.

"As a teacher I would like the district to explore ways to close school when we have high fire danger and no power because I'm able to teach without power, but I don't think it's best for student learning and student safety," Miramonte English teacher Adrienne Spencer said.

This proposal came before the school board during a Nov. 20 meeting. According to Nickerson the districts' teacher union, Acalanes Education Association, supports the initiative but they were not available for comment.

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