

Disaster and renewal: Bobin Public School

| Sarah Parker, Bobin Public School

Bobin is a small village in the hinterland of the mid-north coast NSW. Our community hall and school have been central to community life for over 100 years. On November 8, the Rumba Dump fire roared through Bobin. Of the school buildings, only the library survived.

Fortunately, no students or staff were on campus when the fire came through that Friday. Our principal, Diane Myer, rang the night before saying, 'Sarah, I have a bad feeling about tomorrow. I'm going to have the school declared non-operational'. With no mobile reception or a satellite phone, it would have been very difficult to evacuate students quickly.

As the fire hit, the owner of the neighbouring property sheltered in the creek under a blanket with her dogs. Others ran for their lives or fought together for their homes as best they could. Bobin, Bulga and Pacific Palms Rural Fire Brigades were on the fireground until 4 am.

Power was disrupted for almost two weeks and the phones were off for seven. Three months on, trees were still smouldering. Eighteen homes, many sheds, fences and outbuildings were lost. Wandering livestock became a problem. Feed was scarce and most livestock had to be sold.

Our school's main priority during those first weeks was to hold together. Staff and students relocated to Wingham Public School, 20 kms away, for the remainder of 2019, and were accepted with open arms. It was a relief to be among familiar faces and re-establish learning routines, but difficult to think clearly. We monitored the students closely and they really adjusted well.

Meanwhile the whole village of Bobin watched in astonishment as our school was rebuilt in record time. Every detail was lovingly thought through, and when the students walked in on the first day of the school year, their faces were full of wonder.

We are planning a number of extracurricular activities this year and community members have offered their time and talents. Students want to learn more about the natural environment, and we have begun with a detailed study of eucalyptus trees. Understanding recovery in nature and recognising our delicate place in the ecosystem is an important part of our own recovery.

Most students were already aware of how to prepare their property for bushfire season and many are experts now. They know about pumps, generators, the need to remove flammable materials, how to wet down verandas and gardens, and defend from ember attack. We feel that

the landscape around here has changed. It was once a lush rainforest area with deep creeks and wet gullies. Increased logging in the upper catchments and recent droughts have changed the vegetation and we are now hotter, drier and more bushfire prone.

A few months on and the school has been rebuilt, students are beginning to open up about their experiences and the changes they are dealing with. As a group we have learned to slow down and take each day as it comes. We are focused on our learning, but also the skills to deal with each other's emotions and need for space.

The offers of help and donations we have received from all over the world has been astonishing.

- Wingham Public School donated backpacks of school supplies and provided hot lunches every day, a great relief for tired and traumatised parents.
- One woman drove eight hours with presents from her local craft group to attend our end-of-year school presentation, despite being seriously unwell with cancer.
- Students from Trinity College and Presbyterian Ladies' College in Sydney raised thousands of dollars in cash and vouchers that meant we could purchase extra classroom supplies immediately.
- Students from Gloucester Public School, working with Kids in Need delivered handmade dolls
- A group called Little Helpers on the Run brought presents and hampers.
- A school in the Netherlands held a fundraiser.
- Heart to Heart provided students with art boxes and an art therapy session.

The list goes on and on.

We have been amazed by the resilience of our students. They are renaming their favourite areas of the school and restoring magic to the playground. A student once said to me: 'Children write their songs upon the earth here'. And as they laugh and play on the freshly laid grass, under the remaining trees which are full of new growth, we know they will again.