

# Dust Bowl: Weedpatch School

## GOALS

- Students will evaluate group practices from the past and compare them to more recent events effecting classroom communities
- Students will take personal responsibility for building an inclusive community
- Students will differentiate between things that happened long ago and things that happened recently

## RATIONALE

Children often benefit from adult support when it comes to expressing their feelings and understanding their experiences. Children who remember Hurricane Katrina's effects, particularly those children who experienced evacuation or an influx of new students in their school, can better cope with the events if asked to imagine, and even enact, ways they can improve the situation.

The description of Weedpatch school from the handout offers an example of children banding together to make the best of a difficult situation. You can also show the students pictures of Weedpatch camp. (<http://www.weedpatchcamp.com/camp.htm>)

After introducing the story of Weedpatch School, ask the children for ways they can make their own school a place that reflects pride in their community.

Note: The reading level of the handout is within 3rd-grade range. Younger children are able to participate if guided through the questions.

## PROCESS

- If possible, show the class pictures of the Dust Bowl <<http://usd.edu/anth/epa/dust.html>>. Also use a U.S. map to locate the states most affected, and mark the journey along Route 66 to California.
- Identify Louisiana on the map and ask children to help locate some of the states to which people evacuated after Hurricane Katrina.
- Show the class pictures of Weedpatch Camp<<http://www.weedpatchcamp.com/camp.htm>>.
- Ask students to imagine what it would be like to live in a camp. Ask if they have ever stayed in a similar place.
- Distribute copies of the handout so students can read the description.
- Discuss the reading (see questions on handout).

## FURTHER READING

The "I Can Read" book *Dust for Dinner* (\$3.99, HarperTrophy, reprint edition, ISBN# 006444225X), by Ann Turner, offers a child's perspective on the experience of leaving your home for a place far away.

Also consider reading aloud *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp* (\$9.95, Crown Books for Young Readers, reprint edition, ISBN# 0517880946), by Jerry Stanley.

The National Endowment for the Humanities also has an excellent Dust Bowl education site for grades 3-5 featuring Woody Guthrie's ballads.

# Handout I: Weedpatch School

In the 1920s and '30s, dust storms hit the Great Plains states. The families that grew wheat lost their crops when dust storms burned their fields. With no crops, they had no money to pay the bills. Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas had the worst dust storms.

The dust storms also buried houses and farm tools. Storms made the air bad to breathe. When the storms came, families had to hide in shelters just as if there were a tornado, earthquake or hurricane. Many children got sick from the dust. Dust in their lungs made breathing hard.

Thousands of families had to leave their farms. They packed up all their clothes and some blankets, pots and pans. They had to sell their houses and furniture and leave everything else behind. They drove to California to find work. The farms in California were supposed to have jobs.

But in California, families could not find jobs. They travelled around looking for work, and became migrants. They picked fruit and vegetables on farms. They made so little money they had to live in tents. People were hungry.

One camp for migrant families built a community center and a library so the place would be more like a neighborhood. They performed plays and organized talent shows on weekends.

Even there, life was hard. The people in the next town would not let children from the camp go to their schools. They said the children were poor and not as smart because they weren't from California.

The children at the camp decided to build their own school. They found wood and metal in the junkyard to put up the building. They gathered books and desks students in the neighboring town threw away. They planted a garden and ate vegetables for lunch. They bought a goat and chickens so they could have milk and eggs. Soon, the school was strong.

The children were very proud of the school they built. They were just as smart as the kids in town and grew up to go to the same universities, buy their own houses and get good jobs. Because they worked together and believed in each other, they did just as well as the children in town.

## REMEMBERING KATRINA

In 2005, a powerful hurricane hit New Orleans. The hurricane was so large it hit the neighboring states, Alabama and Mississippi. People who lived near the ocean had to leave their homes. High winds and water from the ocean knocked houses down.

The city of New Orleans flooded, and everyone had to leave the city. For a few days, families had to stay in the Superdome, a sports stadium, with no food, water or electricity. They had nowhere else to go.

Other states like Texas tried to help. They opened shelters and sent buses to bring people from New Orleans. Families found apartments and new jobs. Children went to new schools.

It was very hard to leave home and live far away, but now many people call Texas or other states home. Do you have any new people from New Orleans in your school, community or state?

# Handout II: Reflection Questions

**USE THESE QUESTIONS, IN SMALL GROUPS OR AS A WHOLE CLASS, AFTER READING HANDOUT I TOGETHER.**

1. Have you ever been through a terrible storm? What did you do to keep safe?
2. What do you think you could do to help a new friend who went through a storm?
3. Have you ever moved to a new school? Did people accept you? Was it easy to make friends?
4. Does your community welcome people who lost their homes to Katrina?
5. Does anyone you know say bad things about others like some people used to say about migrant workers?
6. What can you do to make a new student feel welcome at your school?
7. What kinds of supplies do people in your school need? If someone came to your school without supplies, what could you do to help?
8. Have you ever done a group project to grow something, keep your school and neighborhood clean, or help people get supplies? What kind of project could your class do together to make a proud community like Weedpatch?

## **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

1. In what ways were the Weedpatch children like the children who survived Hurricane Katrina?
2. What helps you make it through a storm? What qualities do you see in the Weedpatch children and children who went through Katrina?
3. How are Weedpatch children and the dust storm different from Katrina children and the hurricane?
4. What kind of things did the children from the dust storm and from Katrina need?
5. Do you think your community would welcome the Weedpatch children? Why or why not?