SAN MATEO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

PREPARING FOR

WINTER STORMS

GUIDEBOOK

A PLANNING GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS

Facilities Preparedness • Staff, Students & Family Readiness • Sandbag Locations • Communication Planning

San Mateo County Office of Education

Winter 2026–27

1. Introduction

A very strong El Niño raises the odds of a wetter, harder winter. We know how to get ready for winter; this year, we start earlier.

Make a plan, build a kit, know your sandbag site, and sign up for SMC Alert at smcalert.info

For the projected impact on San Mateo County specifically, our local baseline comes from the January 2023 atmospheric river storms, when 5.8 inches of rain fell in 24 hours, the county declared a local emergency, at least 11 districts closed, and Pescadero flooded.

This document is to help School Sites and Districts prepare for Severe Winter Storms. By preparing our building, school grounds, transportation, materials, supplies and our community, we can prevent damage and secondary emergencies from occurring during inclement weather. Preparing our staff, students and our families helps to ensure a smooth coordinated response, if an emergency were to occur due to the severe weather.

If your area receives a Flood/Flash Flood Watch or Warning Alert or Flooding/Flash Flooding is occurring on your site, please refer to The Big Five, Hazard Response, Inclement Weather: Severe Storms/Flooding Protocol.

2. Critical Information and Resources

- San Mateo County Emergency Management – https://www.smcgov.org/dem
  - Flooding Information – https://www.smcgov.org/dem/flooding-preparedness-and-response
  - SMC Alert Sign-up – https://www.smcgov.org/dem/smc-alert
- The National Weather Service Bay Area – https://www.weather.gov/mtr/
- The California Nevada River Forecast Center – https://www.cnrfc.noaa.gov/
- NOAA tide predictions, for coastal districts – https://www.noaa.gov/
- Pacific Gas & Electric – https://www.pge.com/en/outages-and-safety.html

3. Potential Storm-Related Hazards for Schools

Heavy rainfall and flooding

- Flooded campuses, parking lots, playgrounds, and athletic fields.
- Water intrusion into classrooms, portable buildings, and electrical systems.
- Inaccessible school entrances, bus routes, and evacuation routes.
- Damage to equipment, instructional materials, and school records.
- Sewer backups and contaminated floodwater.

Flash flooding, including desert areas

- Flash floods in washes, dips, and low crossings, including when it is not raining at the school site.

Debris flows, erosion, and landslides

- Increased runoff near hillsides, canyons, steep slopes, and recent wildfire burn scars. Hills and burn scars can still slide days after the rain stops.
- Damage to roads, retaining walls, utilities, and campus grounds.
- Isolation of schools or communities when access routes become unsafe.

Coastal impacts

- Coastal flooding, erosion, high surf, and elevated water levels.
- Kelvin waves can raise sea levels for weeks. Super king tides are expected from November through January. The worst case is a Kelvin wave, a peak king tide, and a significant storm occurring together.
- Disruptions to roads, facilities, and infrastructure near the coast.

Levee and dam concerns

- Know whether your campuses are in a levee-protected area and who maintains the levee.
- Districts downstream of dams should know the dam owner's emergency action plan. Cal OES reviews and approves dam emergency action plans.

Wind and infrastructure disruptions

- Fallen trees and branches, damaged structures, and downed power lines.
- Loss of electricity, internet access, heating, and telephone service.
- Downed trees blocking roads during the school day, which can prevent buses from leaving or parents from reaching campus.

Power outages and utility interruptions

- Loss of refrigeration, lighting, communications, and essential equipment.
- Interruptions to food service, medical support, and other school operations.

4. Preparing for Power Outages

Power outages may occur during storms or through Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS). PSPS events are utility shutoffs to reduce wildfire risk, typically during dry, windy conditions. They are separate from storm-caused outages but can occur before the wet season starts, so plan for both. Districts should plan for short interruptions and extended outages.

- Identify essential school functions that depend on electricity.
- Review backup power capabilities and limitations.
- Establish backup methods for communicating with staff and families. Use the Communication Contingency Plan in the Appendix.
- Identify students and staff who depend on powered medical devices or other critical supports.
- Review food storage, refrigeration, and food service contingencies.
- Determine how heating, ventilation, lighting, water, and sanitation will be affected.
- Establish procedures for securing buildings and protecting records.
- Define criteria for modifying operations, relocating activities, or closing a campus.

5. Preparing for Severe Storms

The first storm for our region is predicted to hit in late November. During the next few weeks, assess your campus' vulnerability and take steps to make your campus storm ready.

Do not wait for the first storm to prepare your campus, prepare now.

Facilities and Operations

Buildings and grounds

- Inspect roofs, gutters, downspouts, and storm drains. Repair roof leaks and clear drainage before the first storm.
- Identify low-lying areas that collect water.
- Clear debris from creeks, culverts, and drainage channels near campus. Where the channel is public, ask the county or city to clear it.
- Have qualified personnel inspect trees and remove hazardous branches.
- Secure outdoor equipment, loose materials, and movable structures. Check that portable classrooms are anchored and drained.
- Review the condition of retaining walls, slopes, and erosion-prone areas.
- Move critical equipment, records, and supplies out of low-lying rooms.
- Identify where sandbags and flood barriers can be obtained and stage them early. Supplies can run short.

Utilities and essential systems

- Identify electrical and mechanical systems vulnerable to flooding.
- Test generators underload. Confirm fuel supply, the service vendor, and which circuits the generator covers.
- Confirm emergency lighting and communication equipment are functional.
- Identify water, sanitation, heating, and ventilation dependencies.
- Establish procedures for reporting utility failures and unsafe conditions.

Transportation and access

- Identify flood-prone roads, bridges, and low-water crossings used by buses and staff.
- Confirm alternate routes with transportation personnel.
- Identify access points that emergency vehicles may need to use.
- Set the procedure and decision-maker for suspending unsafe bus routes.
- Determine whether any campus could become inaccessible during a major storm.

District Office Operations

- Monitor official forecasts and local emergency alerts.

- Confirm flood insurance coverage and photograph and inventory property.
- Confirm the process for reporting impacts and requesting assistance.
- Confirm continuity plans for essential services.
- Update emergency agency contacts information, district leadership contact information, and COE contact information.
- Complete the Communication Contingency Plan (Appendix).

Staff, Students and Families

Preparing Staff

- Review emergency operations and closure procedures, including the decision-maker and alternate.
- Brief school leaders and staff on current procedures.
- Update staff contact information and their emergency contacts.
- Confirm staff are signed up for SMC Alert.
- Identify staff requiring additional accommodation.
- Confirm staffing, transportation, supplies, and communications.
- Review transportation alternatives and reunification procedures.

Preparing Students

- Identify students requiring additional accommodation.
- Communicate expectations, emergency protocols and procedures to students.
- Review Severe Storms/Flooding Protocol with students.
  - Identify and explain Higher Ground Locations and Vertical Refuge Locations.
  - Include developmentally appropriate language.
- Inform students on Storm Safety:
  - Do not walk or bike along creeks, low roads or underpasses during a flood warning.
  - Do not cross moving water; 6 inches can knock over an adult.
  - Do not drive through water on a road. 12 inches of rushing water can carry away most vehicles.
  - Stay out of water that may have electricity in it.

Messaging to Families

- Ensure families are signed up for school emergency communication channels.
- Encourage families to **Get Storm Ready**: Make a Plan, Build a Kit, Check Sandbag Locations and Sign Up for SMC Alert.
  - More information: https://www.smcgov.org/dem/winter-weather-preparedness
- Update student emergency contact information.
- Communicate expectations, emergency protocols and contingencies to families.

6. Sandbag Locations in San Mateo County

Sandbag stations are available in unincorporated areas, cities, and towns across San Mateo County. Reservations are not required, except where noted. Most stations are self-serve. Plan to fill your own bags and bring gloves. Limits and hours vary by location. Where hours are not listed, contact your city or town.

- **Fill your own:** sand and empty bags are available, and you fill the bags yourself.
- **Pre-filled:** bags are already filled and ready to pick up.

How To Fill a Sandbag

- Work in pairs: one person holds the bag open with the top folded out like a collar while the other shovels.
- Fill the bag 1/2 to 2/3 full. Overfilled bags leave gaps that let water through.
- Taking bags home? Tie them loosely near the top, leaving enough slack so the bag still lies flat when placed. Filling on site? Skip the tie and fold the open end under.
- A filled bag can weigh 30 to 50 pounds, heavier when wet, so wear gloves and lift with care.

Information about how to use sandbags can be found here: ***U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Flood Fighting: How To Use Sandbags***

Proper Disposal of Used Sandbags

Dispose of empty sandbags in residential trash containers at the end of the season. Sand may be used in common lawn and garden applications.

City or Town	Locations and Hours	Limit	Bags
Atherton	Holbrook-Palmer Park 150 Watkins Ave, Atherton, CA 94027 Daily, 6:30 am to 6:30 pm	No limit	Fill your own
Belmont	City Hall parking lot 1 Twin Pines Lane Public Works Corporation Yard 110 Sem Lane Barrett Community Center parking lot 1835 Belburn Drive Close to the Ralston Ave entrance **More information:** https://www.belmont.gov/departments/public-works/sandbags	10 per residence	Fill your own

City or Town	Locations and Hours	Limit	Bags
Brisbane	City Hall parking lot, self-service station 50 Park Place 24/7	10 bags, residents only	Pre-filled
Burlingame	Sandbag Station 600 California Drive Monitored and stocked Monday to Friday, 7:30 am to 3 pm **More information:** https://burlingame.org/935/Sandbags	15	Fill your own
Colma	Information coming soon		
Daly City	Daly City Public Works 798 Niantic Ave, Daly City, CA 94014 Monday to Friday, 7 am to 3 pm **More information:** https://dalycity.org/	10	Fill your own
East Palo Alto	Public Works Corporation Yard 150 Tara Road, East Palo Alto, CA 94303 (across from Bay Road) 24/7. Restocked every weekday morning starting October 15th Bring your own gloves. Sand, empty bags, and shovels are provided while supplies last. Questions: (650) 853-3100, ask for the Maintenance Division. **More information:** https://www.ci.east-palo-alto.ca.us/publicworks/page/storm-and-flood-protection-preparation	10 per resident	Fill your own
Foster City	City Hall Parking Lot 610 Foster City Blvd 24/7	10 per car	Fill your own
Half Moon Bay	Sandbag Station 110 Higgins Canyon Road 24/7	No limit	Fill your own
Hillsborough	Walnut Lot 1600 Floribunda Ave Delivery of up to 10 sandbags is available with 2 weeks notice. Call (650) 375-7444.	No limit	Pre-filled

City or Town	Locations and Hours	Limit	Bags
Menlo Park	Fire Station No. 77 1467 Chilco St Burgess Park Parking lot Alma St at Burgess Dr Temporary Pop-Up: Pope St. Island 222 Laurel Ave **More information:** https://www.menlopark.gov/Government/Departments/City-Managers-Office/Emergency-Disaster-Preparedness/Hazards-and-emergencies/Storms-and-flooding/Sandbags	Not specified	Fill your own
Millbrae	Taylor Middle School Parking Lot (Minorca Way) 850 Taylor Blvd, Millbrae, CA 94030 24 hours	Not specified	Fill your own
Pacifica	Council Chambers Parking Lot 2212 Beach Boulevard 24 hours Linda Mar Fire Station 1100 Linda Mar Boulevard 24 hours **More information:** https://www.cityofpacifica.org/departments/public-works/field-services/streets/sandbags	15 per resident	Fill your own
Portola Valley	Portola Valley Town Center Southern driveway, across from the basketball courts 24/7 **More information:** https://www.portolavalley.net/for-residents/public-works/sandbag-station-at-town-center	Residents only. Not for commercial or contractor use.	Fill your own
Redwood City	Sandbag Station 1400 Broadway 24/7, starting mid-October Sandbag Station 2600 Middlefield Road 24/7, starting mid-October	24	Fill your own

City or Town	Locations and Hours	Limit	Bags
San Bruno	Self-Serve Sand Pile, Bags, and Shovels 555 El Camino Real 24 hours Sandbag Station 225 Huntington Avenue Monday to Thursday, 7 am to 4 pm	Pre-made bags: 10 per resident or San Bruno business owner, with proof of residency or business ownership. Self-serve at 555 El Camino Real: no strict limit and no proof required.	Pre-filled and fill your own
San Carlos	Parking Lot Sand Pile 1000 Bransten Rd, San Carlos, CA 94070 24/7 after opening day (TBD)	10	Fill your own
San Mateo	Corporation Yard 1949 Pacific Blvd Beresford Park Parking Lot 2720 Alameda de las Pulgas Anchor Road and Bay Trail Parking Lot Anchor Rd at 3rd Ave / J. Hart Clinton Drive **More information:** https://www.cityofsanmateo.org/4750/Sandbag-Information	10	Fill your own
South San Francisco	Maintenance Corporation Yard 550 N. Canal Street, South San Francisco, CA 94080 **More information:** https://www.ssfca.gov/Departments/Public-Works/Storm-Preparation-Tips	10	Fill your own
Woodside	Woodside Town Hall 2955 Woodside Road, Woodside, CA 94062 Monday to Friday, 8 am to 5 pm	Residents only	Fill your own

Appendix: Communication Contingency Plan

Primary Communication Methods:

Staff Emergency Notification Method (Platform/System):

☐ System tested annually

Family/Community Notification Platforms/Systems (List all currently used):

Families required to receive notifications: ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ System tested annually

Alternative Messaging Devices:

Does your site have an Alternative Messaging Device ☐ Yes ☐ No

Alternative device(s) available:

- Device Type:
- Storage Location:
- Designated/Trained User(s):

☐ Emergency contacts preloaded ☐ Pre-scripted emergency messages stored

Alternative device(s) available: (second device)

- Device Type:
- Storage Location:
- Designated/Trained User(s):

☐ Emergency contacts preloaded ☐ Pre-scripted emergency messages stored

Remote Information Officer (RIO):

District RIO Contact Name: _____ Phone: _____

Partner School/District (if applicable): _____

Partner School/District Contact Name: _____ Phone: _____

County Office of Education Contact Name: _____ Phone: _____

RIO allowed to communicate directly with families and community ☐ Yes ☐ No

RIO has access to student/staff emergency contact lists ☐ Yes ☐ No

RIO has access to social media platforms ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Facebook ☐ X/Twitter ☐ Instagram ☐ Other:

_____

RIO can post updates on school or district website ☐ Yes ☐ No

Information Hubs:

☐ Highly visible signage created to post at entrances to school

- Signage Storage Location: _____

☐ Off-Site Information Hub needed based on location

- Information Hub Location: _____

☐ Parking available ☐ Multiple access routes

☐ Coordinated with Law Enforcement on Information Hub location (Notify upon activation)

Information Hub Supplies:

☐ Hard copy student roster ☐ Hard copy reunification procedures ☐ Portable radio or satellite device

Location of Information Hub Supplies: _____

Family Radio Station (FRS):

☐ School/District has a designated Family Radio Station (FRS)

• Family Information Channel:	

☐ District and RIO notified of channel: