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Students find being emergency officials 'not all that fun'

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A hurricane had slammed the coast. A two-story building collapsed in West Palm Beach, trapping dozens of people. Zoo animals escaped their cages. A crop-duster crashed into Lake Okeechobee. There's looting in the streets. A shooting was reported at a shelter.

It was up to a dozen students at Boynton Beach High to put things back to normal.

"Everything is under control," says Bertho Etienne, a senior playing the chairman of the Palm Beach County Commission, at a press conference following landfall.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Etienne collapses from a heart attack. His media assistants rush to the microphone to finish his statements and answer questions from the press.

A year after Hurricane Wilma struck South Florida, high school students have stepped into the shoes of emergency operations officials, making decisions that will save or sacrifice lives.

They sat at computer terminals, responding to dispatches from the field. If the airport was flooded, they need to decide how to

respond.

"This job is not all that easy or fun," said Kiantae Mims, a junior whose job was tracking the problems and briefing the commission chairman.

Before taking command of the emergency operations center, students created and tracked hurricanes, but science teacher Erich Landstrom said they needed a better understanding of how government responds to them.

"We've already taught them the science," he said. "Now we're teaching the social studies."

The simulation, called StormZone, has been performed in other school districts to give students a better appreciation of emergency operations officials and to promote careers in the field, said Bay Proby, coordinator of StormZone.

Etienne, the commissioner, said the exercise gave him insight into what happens behind the scenes during a disaster and a glimpse into a possible career in public office.

"Before, I used to blame everyone else for problems," he said. "But I see it's not easy as you think it is."

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ERIK M. LUNSFORD/Staff Photographer

A trial run in the hot seat

Xavier Barfield and Andrea Olah of Boynton Beach High peer at a simulated hurricane warning Thursday at the county's Emergency Operations Center near West Palm Beach. Students got to practice handling a crisis. **Story, 3B**