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Students take charge in hurricane simulation

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New River Middle School seventh-graders, Branden Treacy and Nina Jacob decide on what action to take in a simulated hurricane situation at the Broward Emergency Operations Center in Plantation. (Carline Jean, Sun Sentinel / October 9, 2013)

By Karen Yi, Sun Sentinel

5:45 a.m. EDT, October 11, 2013

On Thursday, the fate of **South Florida** lay in the hands of a group of seventh-graders.

Hurricane Barbara, a Category 3 storm, had just struck, leaving an overcrowded hospital without enough food or water. Senior citizens were stranded on an island after an ocean tanker smashed the connecting bridge. Water-logged communities needed to be evacuated.

About 50 students from **New River Middle** in **Fort Lauderdale** huddled in groups at Broward's Emergency Operations Center in **Plantation**, trying to determine

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how to relay help and save lives. Each group was given one of about 15 roles.

It was a hurricane simulation with students assuming the posts of mayor, emergency managers, police, firefighters and health officials.

Some decided how many rescue units to deploy or what medical services to send. Others debated whether to send a construction official or an engineer to secure a building dealing with a small fire.

"The engineer will look at the whole building and can warn people inside if they need to get out fast," argued seventh-grader Ajean Campbell.

But Beatriz Dehuelbes disagreed: "Our point is to save people." And a construction official could quickly secure the building and get people out.

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The simulation was organized by StormZone, a Miami-based severe weather education program that has held such events annually in Broward since 2006. The students were picked because they're part of a marine science magnet program that teaches about hurricanes and preparedness.

On Thursday, a team of students issued weather reports while others posed as reporters questioning the mayor. They spent three hours handling six different situations, both before and after the storm.

"It's a huge eye-opener," said teacher Barbara Rapoza.

She said students often don't understand what goes into planning and responding to hurricanes.

"Students didn't even know the names of all the departments involved during an emergency," said Rapoza.

During a real emergency, about 200 workers are on the main floor but Danielle Chambers, 12, said. "I just thought three people go into a room and say that person go do that."

For Beatriz, it was a perfect lesson in hurricane preparedness.

"If most people stay at home with enough food, you don't have to worry about going to them. You worry about things that happen because of accidents, not things that happen because people aren't prepared," she said.

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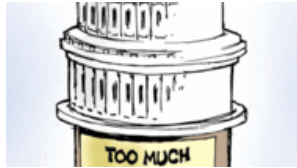
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