

Case Study

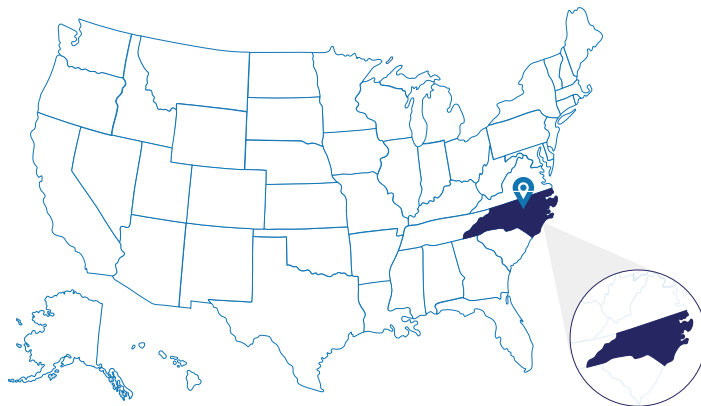
How Buncombe County Schools Supported Displaced Students in the Wake of Hurricane Helene

When Hurricane Helene swept through Western North Carolina, it left Asheville and the surrounding areas devastated. The storm damaged or destroyed [more than 125,000 housing units](#) in communities already struggling with housing shortages. [Buncombe County Schools](#), which serves more than 21,500 students across 45 schools and 660 square miles, faced a series of unprecedented challenges.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene, schools remained closed, and the district's transportation team switched gears, supporting fuel logistics for emergency management teams. They kept cell phone towers fueled, which underpinned rescue efforts in the area.

It took a month to repair the damage to schools, which ranged from minor to major, across Buncombe County. During this time, transportation director [Jeremy Stowe](#) began the gargantuan task of figuring out how to manage transportation in a district with challenging terrain and an unprecedented scale of displaced students spread across the county.

Managing the implementation of the logistics at scale required a partner with expertise. This case study outlines the challenges Buncombe County School District faced and how EverDriven helped them get every student to their schools of origin every day since they reopened their doors.



An Unprecedented Transportation Challenge

Even before Hurricane Helene, Buncombe County's geography created transportation challenges. The county covers 660 square miles that span from suburban to rural areas with steep hills and mountains circumnavigated with winding roads. Stowe described the terrain: "If you drew a line on a map between two of our high schools—North Buncombe High School and Charles de Owen High School—they're about eight miles apart. To travel between the two, you have to go around the range of craggy mountains, and it takes roughly 40 minutes."

When Hurricane Helene hit this area, it destroyed entire neighborhoods throughout these mountains and valleys, leaving more than five percent of the 21,500 students in Buncombe with unstable housing a month after the storm. "We had about 1,200 students whose homes were adversely affected. They were either displaced and homeless or had such significant damage that they weren't sleeping at home," Stowe said. "That's a huge magnitude."

The transportation team had no idea how many students would need personalized transportation outside of the regular bus route. “We weren’t sure if we were going to individually transport 1,200 or two students,” Stowe said. Social workers and the county’s McKinney-Vento liaison, [Shannon Boyd](#), worked day and night to identify the 120+ displaced students who needed transportation support. Once Stowe got the original number of students needing transportation, it was clear that Buncombe’s team needed help.

“These students were scattered everywhere throughout our county, wherever they could get support. It was unthinkable to do our standard prescription for McKinney-Vento, where you add a student’s new pickup location to the front of the route and drop them off at the end of the route because these students were scattered,” Stowe explained. Although these students were often in proximity to a school, it was not their school of origin. Under [McKinney-Vento legislation](#), these students have the right to transportation to their “home school.”

Jeremy Stowe turned to [Jeff Bureson](#), a retired principal for Buncombe County Schools with 32 years of experience in the county schools, to jump in and lead a partnership with EverDriven to transport displaced students. “We needed to get these kids back to school in late October, even though it was more than the existing infrastructure and staff could handle. That’s where EverDriven came in,” Stowe said.

Building a Modern Transportation Solution for Buncombe

EverDriven offers expertise in implementing modern, supplemental transportation to support school districts under strain. Because the team is well-versed in the distinct challenges communities face after a natural disaster—displaced students at scale, intense timelines, damaged roads, and ever-changing pickup and drop-off locations—EverDriven was able to help Buncombe County from day one. Here’s how the two organizations worked together to support Buncombe County Schools’ goals on their timeline.



Setting Up a New System and Team

Once the team had a baseline list of students who needed transportation support and their temporary addresses, EverDriven began setting up new infrastructure. “Diana Calderon from EverDriven came to town and helped me figure out how to work with the technology,” Bureson explained. She guided the team through onboarding.

“I spent two weeks on the ground with the Buncombe team, walking them through every part of the process and how EverDriven operates. That time allowed us to build a strong foundation for the partnership,” Calderon said.

At the same time, Calderon pulled drivers from other regions and areas to help with transportation in Buncombe County while also recruiting locally. “We had just 10 days to get drivers in place due to the urgency and uniqueness of the situation,” Calderon explained. “I immediately connected with one of our most trusted service providers in Florida, and together we assembled a task force of vetted, experienced drivers to ensure a smooth and timely start. Within four weeks, all drivers were transitioned to local, vetted personnel. We successfully met the start date, setting a record for response time and operational readiness. This pool of drivers also included backup drivers to ensure we could match the need as it ebbed and flowed. Because of our depth of expertise and national reach, we were able to get drivers vetted, educated, and ready to help within days.”

Meanwhile, EverDriven’s routing team worked hard behind the scenes to ensure students were taking the shortest, safest drives from their location to school and back. With the infrastructure set up in advance, students entered their regular classroom on time and ready to learn.

Adapting to Changing Student Circumstances

From the first day of school, Burleson worked closely with EverDriven to support students and drivers, especially as students continued to manage unstable housing. Displaced students often moved frequently and sometimes stopped or started needing transportation based on their new location, which required a lot of pivots.

"People were devastated," Burleson said. "They'd lost everything and didn't know where they were going to be. I had some who were in a hotel for one week and then another hotel for two weeks. After, they would move to a campground, and then two weeks later, they would move to another campground. That was one of the hardest things."

The [EverDriven VIP app](#) ensured that even while in such tremendous transition, parents knew their students' whereabouts during their ride to school because of the real-time tracking. "The feedback we get is that EverDriven's VIP app is really helpful for families. They know when their kid is getting to school and back to them. There have been no complaints," Stowe said.

As families moved to and from temporary housing, social workers maintained constant contact with them and Jeff Burleson, who worked with EverDriven's local support team to change addresses and troubleshoot at the moment.

“ It is an amazing system, and EverDriven takes on so much work: finding drivers and transporting kids. How well and smoothly it works is amazing. The greatest thing has been our point person, Kristin Chesson at EverDriven. The work she does every day with a smile on her face is incredible. That has made EverDriven work really well for us. ”

Jeff Burleson

EverDriven takes extra steps to ensure partnering school districts have everything they need, particularly in a crisis. Work is more than a job for the EverDriven team, a sentiment that Calderon echoed: "What pushed me to go above and beyond was believing in our mission and caring deeply for the vulnerable communities who had lost so much. More than just feeling the weight of the crisis, we felt overwhelming gratitude from the school districts, parents, students, and school staff. It was a true team effort, and it's what led to the successful and stable operations we have today."

The Results: Long-Term Support for Students in Buncombe County

Six months after the storm, EverDriven was still transporting 85 students from 60 families to Buncombe County Schools, many of whom are still changing locations regularly. These students, who have faced such tremendous hardship, benefit from their continued ability to attend their home school. "It's a great recovery strategy," Stowe said. "Let's keep them surrounded by their teachers, their peers, their friends. I personally feel as though it's been a blessing to these students. While they're in school, they're able to leave behind the chaos the storm introduced."

As Buncombe County moves into the next stage of recovery, EverDriven will continue to support students in transition. The transportation solution hasn't only benefited students. It's also supporting parents and the communities at large. "Our public schools showed up and were part of that backbone that helped get everybody back on their feet. It was really incredible for me to see and to be part of," Stowe said.

Whether your district is navigating the aftermath of a disaster, supporting students in temporary housing, or facing widespread displacement, EverDriven delivers safe, reliable transportation that keeps learning on track. [Learn more.](#)