

School Resumes After Texas Blast, but Town's Frustration Grows

The only one of four schools in a Texas town to escape damage from a deadly fertilizer plant blast reopened on Monday with hugs for students and parents, as some residents expressed frustration they had not been allowed to return to damaged homes.

Fourteen people were killed and some 200 injured in the huge explosions at the West Fertilizer Co. facility that supplied agricultural chemicals and fertilizer to area farmers.

The cause of what is assumed to be an industrial accident has not been determined, although the facility stored liquid anhydrous ammonia fertilizer in huge tanks and ammonium nitrate in dry form. Both are considered hazardous materials that could ignite under certain conditions.

A line of cars and trucks swept around West Elementary School as parents kissed their children and hugged their teachers, on the first day of school since the explosion.

"It's the first step, but getting back going again, some normalcy for our staff and faculty's lives and our kids lives, it's a huge milestone," said Marty Crawford, West Independent School District Superintendent.

The devastating explosion destroyed the intermediate school closest to the fertilizer plant and badly damaged the high school, Crawford said. He did not say the condition of the fourth campus, the middle school.

Over the weekend, volunteers built three temporary classrooms at the elementary school, which has 400 students, readying

them for an additional 300 students. Efforts to settle them included putting teddy bears on desks and names on their lockers.

Stephanie Cunningham said she had mixed feelings about letting go of her three children, who are kindergarten, 4th and 6th graders.

"The kids feel like it's getting back to normal... I'm kinda glad and kinda sad that they're already going back," she said, chatting through the window of her car in a long line of vehicles rolling up to the school. "I wasn't ready to let them go away from me yet."

Parents Chuck and Lee Smith, dropped off their 12-year-old daughter and their neighbor's daughter, and were walking back home on the tree-lined street.

"They need to be here, to be with their friends, hug 'em, cry and laugh, and do that kind of stuff," said Lee. "The stories they'll tell!" said Chuck. "She (their 12-year-old daughter?) was at church when it happened and the acoustic ceiling collapsed on their class room. It scared 'em all, and they all came running out."

Nearly five days after the blast, some residents who live closest to the plant were growing frustrated that they had not been allowed back home to check out their property.

Bill Killough, 76, said he had checkbooks, medication and guns sitting out where he had left them after fleeing his home in a hurry.

"They don't care. Don't care," he said, referring to federal authorities who he believes are calling the shots here.

"There's no reason why they can't escort" residents in to get their belongings, he said.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, is among a host of state and federal agencies on

the scene investigating and providing other services.

The explosion at the privately owned West Fertilizer Co retail facility gutted a 50-unit apartment complex, demolished about 50 houses and battered a nursing home and several schools. Dozens more homes were reported damaged.

A reporter allowed into the evacuated blast zone on Sunday said the roof was torn off the apartment complex. Large chunks of concrete hurled from the plant littered the complex grounds hundreds of yards (meters) away, and a basketball court was unrecognizable except for the toppled goals, according to a pool report.

Most of the 14 dead were paramedics or volunteer firefighters who responded to an initial call to put out a fire and were presumed killed in the explosion 20 minutes after the blaze. Names of four firefighters killed in the blast were released on Sunday.

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