

Pupils drilled for natural disaster

By **Barry Alleyne**
In Sendai, Japan

In some Japanese communities, there is a saying that things flow better from the bottom to the top.

The teachers and students of the Schichigo Elementary School live by that mantra, and hope their actions can save thousands of lives in the future.

Located in the earthquake and tsunami-prone city of Sendai in eastern Japan, the large elementary school was chosen as one of just two in the area to be part of a special disaster management programme, which involved all students being taught the tenets of preparedness in the event of a natural disaster.

“We have tried to incorporate disaster preparedness as much as we can into the curriculum since it is not a requirement from the ministry at this time,” vice principal Masaki Nakatsuji said to a group of Caribbean and Pacific-island reporters touring the city.

School officials decided on the programme after its



Vice principal Masaki Nakatsuji.

students miraculously escaped death or injury in the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011.

But according to Nakatsuji, it's not just for Japan.

“The programme can be transferred anywhere in the world,” he told reporters, noting the same disaster preparedness rules apply for those affected by floods, hurricanes or earthquakes like small Caribbean and Pacific islands such as Barbados and Samoa.

At Schichigo, more than



Mitsuhiro Shiraishi, principal of Shichigo Elementary School in Sendai, Japan.

(Pictures by Floyd K. Takeuchi.)

1 000 students are enlightened on a variety of measures, inclusive of how to restart agriculture should a sector be wiped out, the everyday risks during earthquakes, and how to move to safety should an area be inundated with the raging waters of a tsunami.

All students, who are usually between six and 12 years old, also partake in about three drills every year, information about which can also be passed

on to adults in their respective communities.

Ten-year-olds at the school, who were about four years old when the Great East Japan event sent shockwaves through the city, were part of a programme where they learnt how to plant and harvest rice, should a crop be destroyed.

First graders, six-year-olds mostly, are taught the risks during earthquakes, and what to do to avoid falling shelves or large objects which tend to move about during shaking that can last for up to one minute during serious earthquakes.

Most deaths in Japan during earthquakes derive from people being crushed by fallen objects.

“The main purpose of the entire programme is to ensure all the students are aware of how to protect themselves,” the vice-principal said. “If that information is made available to them, they will know how to function without the aid of adults should something happen,” he added.

In addition to the programme, the school is equipped with fire-resistant gear which can

also be used to cover the heads of students. All kids have been taught how to evacuate the building at a moment's asking.

Principal of the school, Mitsuhiro Shiraishi, noted there was some difficulty implementing the programme at the onset, since some children, mostly who were born after the earthquake and tsunami, did not understand the true gravity of the event.

But, through the telling of stories by people in the community, they were made abreast of what previous generations went through.

The students spend 30 hours every school year learning disaster preparedness.

“I felt it was important for children to know how to keep themselves safe instead of having to wait for people to take them to safety instead,” the principal asserted.

“I wanted them to realise that when they become older, they will be important members of the community, should a disaster strike. We worked hard to create this curriculum for that reason,” Shiraishi said.

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