



June 4, 2009

Updated: Weather Service confirms a small tornado hit Apalachee Elementary

democrat staff report

updated 4:33 p.m.

The National Weather Service in Tallahassee has confirmed that a very small tornado hit Apalachee Elementary School this morning.

The tornado packed winds of 65 to 70 mph, which means it has a rating of zero on the enhanced Fujita Scale. By comparison, a tornado with a rating of 5 has winds greater than 200 mph.

"It was very small," said Kelly Godsey, meteorologist with the Weather Service. "The damage was very localized."

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

updated 4:13 p.m.

A portion of the roof at Apalachee Elementary School was torn off Thursday morning during strong storms that hit the Tallahassee area.

Students weren't at the school at the time, but teachers and staff were there for a math workshop, said Chris Petley, a spokesman for the district. No one was injured, but debris damaged some cars in the parking lot of the school, located at 650 Trojan Trail on Tallahassee's east side.

Pieces of the roof were strewn across the property, some landing in the parking lot, trees and a nearby retention pond.

"It sounded like a locomotive train heading straight across the top of the roof," said Principal Ross Witherspoon, who was inside when the storm hit. "Everybody was quite shocked."

The National Weather Service in Tallahassee was investigating whether a tornado caused the damage. Meteorologists said no tornado was indicated on radar. Witherspoon said that the school was in the last month of a two-year, \$12-14 million renovation project and that some of the worst damage was in the newly completed media center area.

Superintendent Jackie Pons said an assessment was being done to determine damage estimates and the cost of repairs. Along with the roof damage, water poured into the school, damaging science and computer labs, teachers said. Many computers were ruined.

Deborah Fogler, a third-grade teacher, was standing in the front office when the storm hit. She heard a "loud grinding noise" that made her look out the window, and she saw wind and debris going by.

"I couldn't tell what it was because it was coming by so fast," she said.

Another teacher, Sara Wallace, said the roof looked like it was moving, and then the lights blinked off and came back on.

A school employee came in from another room and told Wallace that part of the roof had hit her truck. Fearing the truck was smashed, Wallace went outside and was relieved to see that an aluminum part of the roof had simply landed on the hood of her truck. It had minor damage.

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"No one was hurt," Wallace said. "That's the best part."

Petley said the Summer Reading Academy for first and third grades has been moved from the school to Hartsfield Elementary, while the 21st Century program has been moved to Ruediger Elementary.

Bill Behenna, a city of Tallahassee spokesman, said debris from the school wrapped around a power line and temporarily knocked out power to 1,600 customers on the east side.

The Leon County Sheriff's Office and the Tallahassee Police Department assisted at the scene.

updated 1:27 p.m.

Sara Wallace, a teacher at Apalachee Elementary School, was inside the building when a portion of the roof was torn off this morning during storms that hit the Tallahassee area.

"We were having a math workshop, and all of a sudden we heard this loud, thunderous noise, " Wallace said. "The roof looked like it was moving."

Wallace said the lights blinked off, then came back on. A school employee came in from another room and told Wallace that part of the roof had hit her truck. Fearing that her truck was smashed, Wallace went outside and was relieved to see that an aluminum part of the roof had simply landed on the hood of her truck.

Other than a crack and some minor scratches, there was no further damage.

"No one was hurt," Wallace said. "That's the best part."

updated 1:18 p.m.

The National Weather Service in Tallahassee is investigating whether a tornado caused damage today at Apalachee Elementary School.

"We're going to take a look at it and see," said Parks Camp, meteorologist with the Weather Service.

He added that Weather Service radar didn't indicate a tornado. But that doesn't rule one out.

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

updated 1:10 p.m.

Chris Petley, a spokesman for the Leon County school district, said that the National Weather Service is predicting another band of 40-50 mph winds to come through the area. For this reason, Petley said, maintenance crews are working to clear debris from Apalachee Elementary School to prevent further damage.

Principal Ross Witherspoon said that the school was in the last month of a \$12-14 million renovation project and that some of the worst damage from today's winds was in the newly completed media center area.

Leon County Schools Superintendent Jackie Pons said they didn't have an estimated cost of the damage, but that a complete assessment was being done to determine the cost of repairs.

updated 12:39 p.m.

Apalachee Elementary School Principal Ross Witherspoon was at the school this morning when strong winds blew off a portion of the roof.

"It sounded like a locomotive train heading straight across the top of the roof," he said. "Everybody

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was quite shocked."

Rain poured into the school and damaged a computer lab and science lab, school officials have said. No one was hurt, and no students were at the school at the time.

A first-grade reading academy was supposed to start Monday at the school. Now, it has been moved to Hartsfield Elementary School.

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

updated 12:13 p.m.

Teachers at Apalachee Elementary School said they saw a tornado move through the parking lot and tear off a portion of the school's roof this morning.

However, the National Weather Service in Tallahassee has not confirmed that the damage was from a tornado.

Chris Petley, a spokesman for the Leon County school district, said no one was hurt. He described the damage as extensive.

"Half of the roof is pretty much gone, and it's in pieces along the parking lot and in trees," he said.

It happened about 11:15 a.m. No students were in the school at the time. Teachers and staff were there for a math workshop. Some teachers have said they saw a twister.

Susan Huff, a teacher, said rain poured into the school through the hole in the roof and damaged the computer lab and science lab. The school has been under renovations for two years, she said.

"It's a real mess," she said, adding that she was grateful no one was hurt.

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

updated 12:06 p.m.

Susan Huff, a teacher at Apalachee Elementary School, said strong winds blew off a portion of the roof this morning at the school.

She and all the other teachers were at the school this morning for a math workshop.

"We were sitting in the library, which is in the middle of the school, and we started hearing very loud sounds," she said. "It ripped the metal roof off the building, and then some of it ended up in the parking lot on teachers' cars."

Some of the debris also landed in a nearby retention pond.

District officials are at the school now assessing damage.

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

first update

A portion of the roof at Apalachee Elementary School was torn off this morning during storms that hit the Tallahassee area, said Leon County Schools Superintendent Jackie Pons.

Officials are going through the school now to assess the damage. They weren't sure whether anyone was in the school at the time. There are no reports of injuries.

Bill Behenna, a city of Tallahassee spokesman, said debris from the school wrapped around a power

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line and knocked out power to 1,600 customers. Power has since been restored.

Check back with Tallahassee.com for more on this story.

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