



## EDUCATION

# Plan in place to stabilize Swansea school damaged by subsidence, so rebuilding can begin

BY LEXI CORTES  
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February 21, 2018 06:13 PM  
Updated 27 minutes ago

State officials have a plan to stabilize a mine that collapsed under a Swansea school so the district can begin rebuilding.

Five months ago, the ground beneath Wolf Branch Middle School dropped almost 25 inches when the abandoned Summit Mine collapsed, according to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The agency said it caused "extensive structural damage" to the building.

More than 450 students and their teachers evacuated in September after cracks and buckling floor tiles were discovered. Classes and after-school activities moved to the district's nearby elementary school.

The plan to stop the subsidence, or gradual sinking, involves pumping a concrete mixture into the mine, a process known as grouting. It is estimated that the project will begin in mid-April and will be completed by early summer, IDNR stated in a news release Wednesday.

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The project will cost nearly \$1.9 million in federal money from the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement.

IDNR previously used \$288,374 in federal money to hire engineers to drill into the ground to determine the mine's location and condition. The money also paid for a chain link fence that was put up around the building.

Mine subsidence work continues at Wolf Branch Middle School

Wolf Branch District 113 has had expenses related to the subsidence, too.

When administrators moved out of the middle school in November, the district starting leasing a trailer to house their offices for \$450 per month. School board members also hired Ittner Architects to eventually take care of the district's construction needs at the middle school.

The building is 16 years old and cost \$16 million to construct.

According to IDNR's release, District 113 plans to rebuild the damaged portions of the building with district money. The portion that is "heavily damaged" will be removed, and the district will have help with the cost from the IDNR Abandoned Mine Land Program. That state program is funded by fees from coal mine operations.

"The efficient leveraging of available funds will allow the school building to reopen and, most importantly, to ensure a safe place for the children to learn," Tom Benner, director of the IDNR Office of Mines and Minerals, stated in the release.

After the grouting project is finished, Wolf Branch Middle School will be monitored for a number of months before any rebuilding can begin, District 113 Superintendent Scott Harres wrote in a post to the district's Facebook page Wednesday.

District 113 officials had been meeting with IDNR, the Illinois State Board of Education and State Rep. Jay Hoffman, D-Swansea, about possible financial help since September, according to the timeline of events related to the subsidence that was added to the district's website.

The timeline starts with Aug. 21, when a small crack was discovered in a hallway at the middle school.

How Wolf Branch Middle School is dealing with the movement

By Aug. 28, a week later, some floor tile had buckled about 20 feet from the original crack, so the district brought in the building's architects and engineers to take a look.

IDNR got involved Sept. 11 and has been investigating since.

The school district stated on its Facebook page that the timeline will continued to be updated at [wbsd113.org](http://wbsd113.org) as new information becomes available.

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## EDUCATION

# As safety concerns force students to leave, officials hope to repair school's damage

BY LEXI CORTES  
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September 13, 2017 09:58 AM

Updated September 13, 2017 09:17 PM

SWANSEA — Wolf Branch District 113 is evacuating its middle school after it was damaged by mine subsidence.

But Superintendent Scott Harres says he hopes the cracks and buckling tiles can eventually be repaired at the 15-year-old building.

Starting next week, the middle school students will move into the elementary school building.

All Wolf Branch schools will be closed Thursday and Friday while staff and other volunteers prepare the elementary building for the transition.

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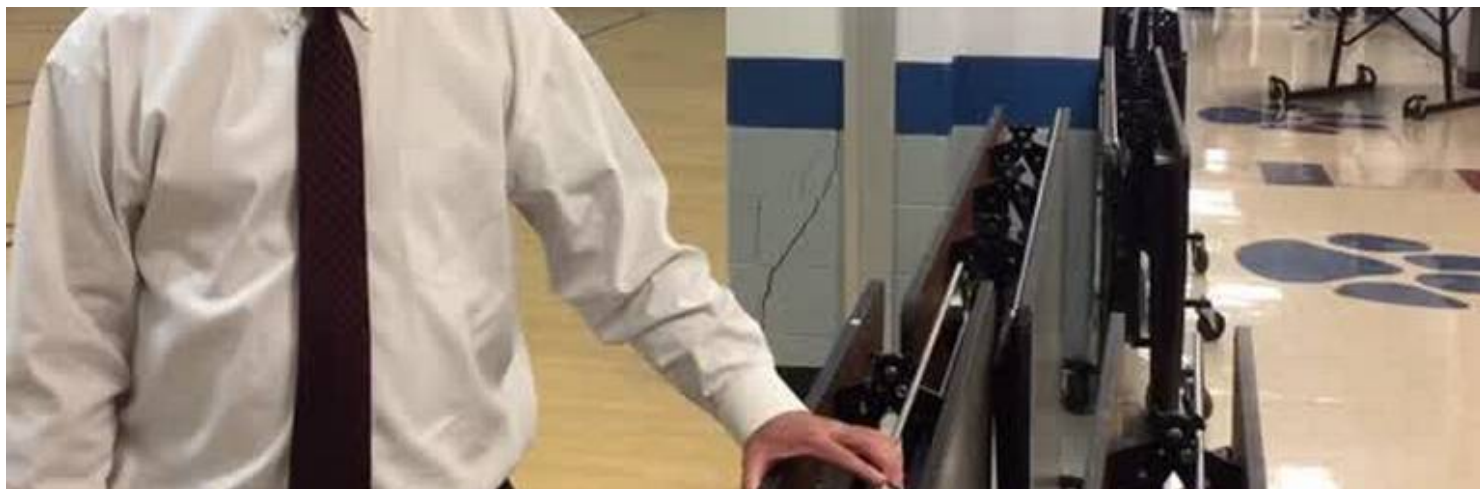
Harres made the announcement in a message to parents dated Tuesday, Sept. 12.

“While extra space at the (Wolf Branch) Elementary School is limited, the administration has developed a plan to utilize nearly every square inch of the building,” Harres wrote. “We know that these moves will create growing pains and hurdles. However, in the interest of our students’ safety, and following today’s consultation meeting with the Department of Natural Resources’ engineers, we have concluded that there is not a viable alternate way of safely serving daily hot lunch selections.”

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources issued a public statement Tuesday afternoon that said Wolf Branch Middle School sits on top of the abandoned Summit Mine. The subsidence, or gradual sinking, is affecting about three acres of land, according to IDNR.

At the beginning of the week, the district restricted access to its cafeteria, gym, locker rooms and weight room. It also closed the eastern entrance to the building. The IDNR on Tuesday advised the district close off more areas, including its kitchen serving area and band room, according to Harres.





Superintendent Scott Harres explains what is going on and the contingency plans they are making for students. Steve Nagy — [snagy@bnd.com](mailto:snagy@bnd.com)

Classes were in session Wednesday at the middle school, with students getting pizza or a sack lunch in the library. Starting Monday, Sept. 18, the middle school will be closed, and school officials don't know for how long. IDNR has said it will continue monitoring the ground movement under the building until it stops or becomes more minor.

Mine subsidence has caused damage at other metro-east schools, including Joseph Arthur Middle School in O'Fallon, the old Belle Valley North in Belleville and the old Dorris School in Collinsville.

Because the metro-east is filled with underground mines, Harres said "precautions" were taken when the architects and engineers constructed Wolf Branch Middle School in 2002.

"It's my understanding that they did take certain precautions," he said. "I was a fifth-grade science teacher at the time in the other building, and my only concern at that time was exciting kids about science.

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“From what the engineers from the Department of Natural Resources have told me, there’s a number of things that could have occurred, and so I don’t know that (the builders) could have done anything that would have given a 100 percent guarantee.”

In Collinsville’s case, students moved out of Dorris School and the building was eventually demolished after it experienced mine subsidence. Belle Valley North was evacuated, and the wing that was damaged was demolished.

Joseph Arthur Middle School’s damage hasn’t caused any safety concerns, and engineers haven’t detected more movement for the last year. If that continues, Central District 104 Superintendent Dawn Elser said the floor could be repaired by next summer.

Harres said the goal is to move students back into Wolf Branch Middle School if it can be repaired, too.

“My main goal, my main intention is to get back in here as quickly as possible — but not until all the parts of the building that currently have been labeled as unsafe are safe once again,” he said.

As the subsidence issues have progressed quickly at the Swansea school, Harres said Wolf Branch has been hearing from parents, the village of Swansea, Swansea police, local churches, businesses and other school districts.

“Everybody is calling and saying, ‘Can I help?’” Harres said.

Parents like Kelly Rose are among the volunteers who plan to move items into the elementary school — or offer food to those who do, along with the area businesses.

“We’re so happy that the staff and the administration has taken the necessary steps to keep the kids safe,” Rose said. “... We want to help make the transition as easy as possible.”

The churches and school districts are offering to let Wolf Branch students use their facilities for the indoor sports teams, according to Harres. And police want to help guide traffic at the elementary school, where there will be even more buses and other vehicles adding congestion.

“I really am overwhelmed by the support and offers for help that we’re getting,” Harres said.

District 113 staff are “really coming together,” too, he said.

The elementary school will be more crowded, but Harres said it has housed more students before.

In the late 1990s, he said there were about 950 students at the elementary school building. Next week, there will be about 850 students from the entire district in that building.

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## EDUCATION

# Wolf Branch's damage caused by mine, officials say — just like other nearby schools

BY LEXI CORTES  
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September 12, 2017 05:03 PM

Updated September 13, 2017 09:00 AM

Recent damage to Wolf Branch Middle School's building was caused by mine subsidence, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources stated Tuesday.

The agency's Office of Mines and Minerals was notified Monday after school officials noticed the effects of the ground moving underneath the building. Cracks and buckling floor tiles beyond a building's normal settling prompted them to call the experts, according to District 113 Superintendent Scott Harres.

IDNR released a statement Tuesday afternoon that said Wolf Branch Middle School sits on top of the abandoned Summit Mine, which operated from 1894 to 1940.

The subsidence, or gradual sinking, is affecting about three acres of land, according to IDNR.

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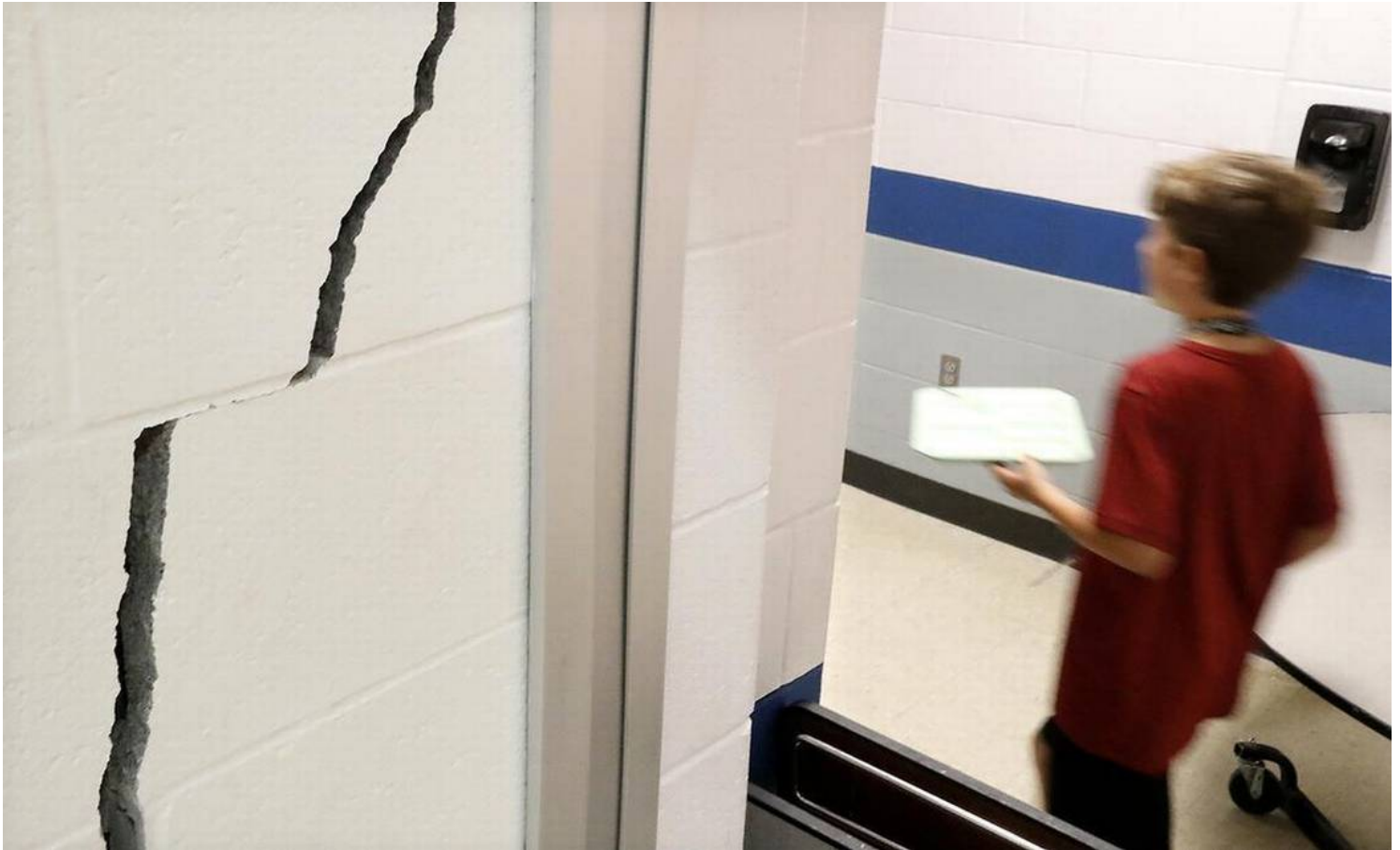
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IDNR's statement noted that it will be at the school daily in the short term and could continue monitoring it on a less frequent basis for several months.

“The situation is a dynamic one that IDNR will continue to monitor until subsidence movements have stopped or become negligible,” the agency stated.



A student walks by a one-inch wide crack which is several feet high Monday at Wolf Branch Middle School in Swansea.

Steve Nagy - snagy@bnd.com

Wolf Branch District 113 decided to close off portions of the middle school building starting on Monday, including the cafeteria and gym, locker rooms and weight room. Harres said at the time that district officials believed the rest of the building was safe.

In the past, other metro-east schools have also been affected by mines under their floors.

Joseph Arthur Middle School in O'Fallon is still being monitored after a crack developed in the floor of a hallway four years ago, according to Central District 104 Superintendent Dawn Elser.

The school was built in 2007. Officials first noticed the crack in 2013, and Elser said it got bigger in 2016.

Last year, the district contacted SCI Engineering to assess the damage, according to Elser.

The engineers believe the subsidence was caused by a mine outside the building to the northwest, which is where an unused field sits. Elser said engineers told school officials there wasn't a safety concern.

"Kids were still able to go up and down the hallway," she said. "We did not have to shut off any classrooms or hallway spaces."

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Between August 2016 and July 2017, Elser said the engineers monitored the crack monthly but didn't see any more movement. Now, she said they'll monitor it quarterly. If there's no change, Elser said the district could repair the floor by next summer. District 104's subsidence insurance would be used to pay for it, she said.

Because there was no additional movement, Elser said the district didn't need to contact IDNR like Wolf Branch did.

Belle Valley District 119 has also dealt with subsidence. In 2007, officials started seeing damage at the old Belle Valley North elementary school in Belleville. Students have since moved into the district's newly constructed building, where no mines have been detected.

Bob Gibson, an abandoned mines expert for IDNR, told the News-Democrat in 2008 that Belle Valley North's building was damaged by a collapse 150 feet below the ground in the Ell-Rich Coal Mine.

District 119's Business Manager Joan McKay remembers that the school evacuated and eventually demolished eight classrooms and the multipurpose room, which served as a gym and cafeteria, as a result.

She said teachers had to get creative to find replacement classroom space.

"When those eight classrooms were removed from that building, we had to use every available space that was left. ... Anything that could be used as a classroom was used," including the library, McKay said.

Other school districts in the area reached out to Belle Valley 119 to help with the space issue it was experiencing, according to McKay.

"I do believe there were several area schools that had offered some available classrooms. ... But they wanted to try to keep the children all in our school," she said of district officials at the time.

Today, Belleville District 118 is offering to let Wolf Branch students use Belleville gym space while the subsidence prevents them from using their own gym in Swansea, according to Superintendent Matt Klosterman.

In a letter sent to Wolf Branch parents on Monday, Superintendent Harres mentioned that the middle school athletes could practice and play in the district's elementary school gym or multipurpose room.

When basketball season starts, he said eight teams will be sharing that space: girls and boys teams for fifth through eighth grades. That means some practices could go later into the evening and some could overlap with other teams, according to Harres.

Wolf Branch Middle School's cafeteria is also closed off, so students are eating lunch at tables outside or in hallways in the meantime.



Wolf Branch Middle School 7th-graders Lauren Pugada (from left), Emily Messinger and Olivia Pereda eat lunch on picnic tables on the school's playground while other students play basketball in the background. Students will either eat in the halls or on the playground now that the cafeteria seating area is closed off.

Steve Nagy - [snagy@bnd.com](mailto:snagy@bnd.com)

When Belle Valley North's cafeteria was unavailable, McKay said the students ate lunch in their classrooms.

"Since we lost the capability of using that cafeteria, they had to deliver all the lunches to the classrooms in Styrofoam boxes" until the students moved into the new building in 2012, she said.

Another Belleville school's buildings sit on top of abandoned mines, but it hasn't experienced the effects of subsidence.

Superintendent Jeff Dosier said Belleville District 201 staff haven't noticed any significant cracks at Belleville East High School that would be evidence of subsidence. The campus is entirely undermined.

Dosier said the builders back in the 1960s planned for a stabilization technique that could be used if the some of the campus' 26 buildings ever experienced sinking.

“That’s something we hope we never have to deal with,” Dosier said.

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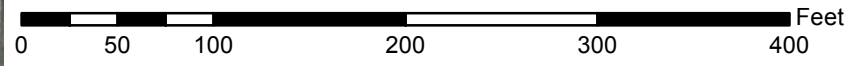
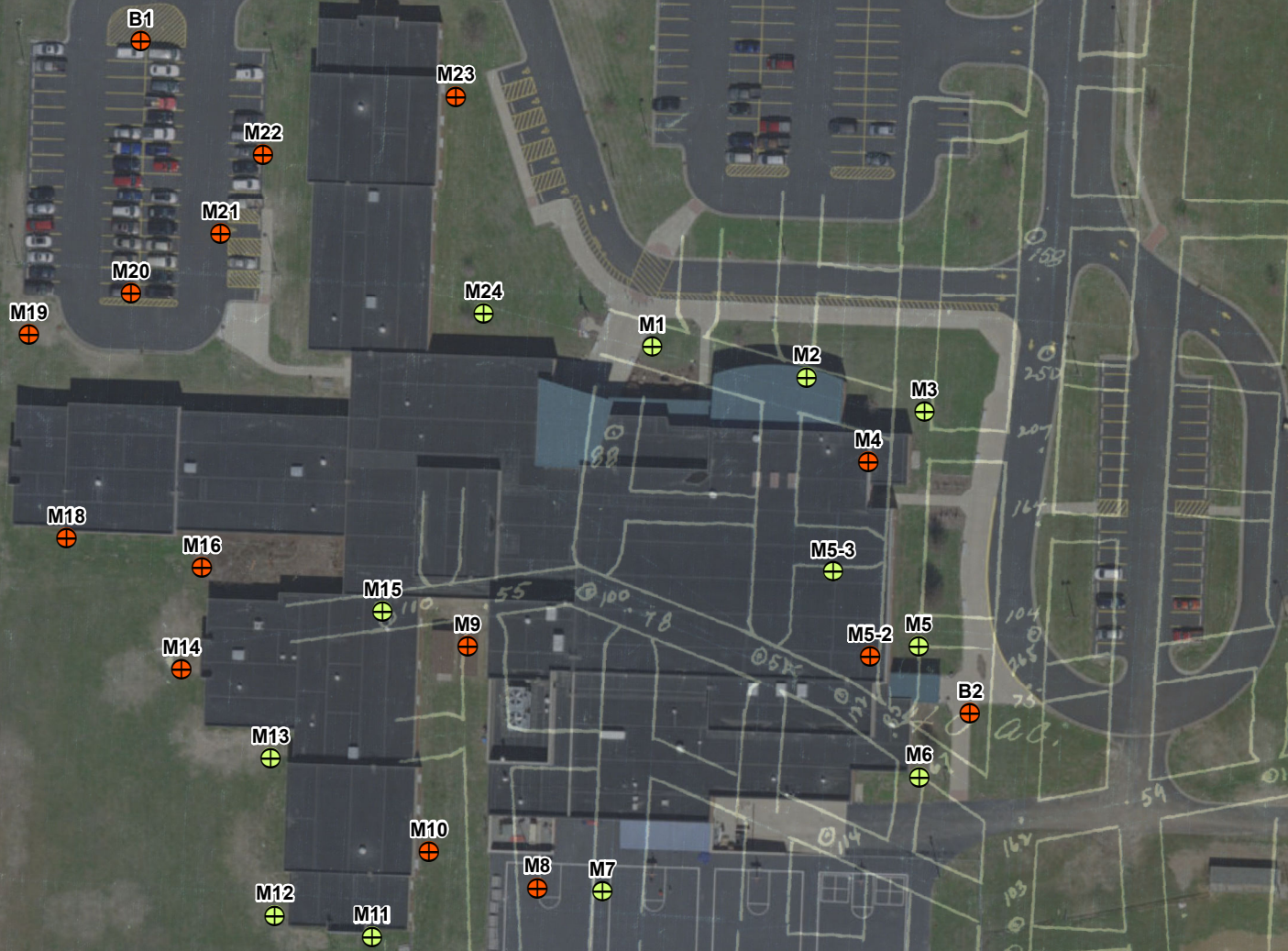
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