

### The Decision to Close School:

As we get closer to the winter season, we have to start thinking of the phrase that parents hate to hear, but students love to hear, “No School today”. This is one of those decisions that no matter what is decided, somebody will think that it is the wrong decision. I often hear the comment, “When I was in school, we never had a snow day and that was when we had to walk five miles to school in the snow, uphill....both ways”. I am still trying to figure out how it can be uphill both ways. So what goes into the decision to cancel school or not? While there are several different conditions that can close school, the top priority is always student safety.

Excessive snowfall or blowing and drifting snow is definitely the condition that causes us to cancel school the most. I am often asked how much snow has to fall before we cancel school and the answer is not that easy. We could get quite a bit of snow, but if there is not much wind and the roads are clear by the time our busses are ready to run, then we would not cancel school. On the other hand, even if we only had several inches of snow, but the wind is causing it to blow all over the place, creating unsafe road conditions, then we would need to take a serious look at closing school. When making the decision based on snowfall, the main question that needs to be addressed is, “Are the road conditions safe enough for our busses to be able to run their routes?”

Of course, another condition that we have encountered several times in the past has been the bitterly cold conditions. When it gets too cold, it can create unsafe conditions for our students. When the wind chill gets around 25 degrees below zero, frostbite can begin to occur within fifteen minutes. With students either waiting at a bus stop, or walking to school, they could very easily be exposed to these conditions for this long. Once again, I often hear the comments about how “it was 50 degrees below zero when I went to school and we didn’t worry about it”. In 2001, the National Weather Service actually recalculated the wind chill chart. For more information about wind chill, you can click on this link: [http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/cold/wind\\_chill.shtml](http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/cold/wind_chill.shtml)

When we are expecting these conditions to occur, the decision-making process begins. One of the first things that I do is look at the forecast well in advance. I often will have the weather channel webpage up on my computer checking the five to ten day forecast, trying to anticipate the need to look at whether we need to close school. The next step in the process is communication with other Superintendents in the area. Obviously, one of the first groups are the Superintendent from our feeder schools. We realize that if the feeder schools have to cancel, but we stay in school, that puts a great burden on parents who are relying on older siblings to watch the younger children. So, we generally try not to do that. In addition to those Superintendents, I also communicate with other Superintendents in the area to see what they are planning to do with their districts. If the condition that is going to cancel school is snowfall, then the next group of people that I contact are the road commissioners that cover our district. They are the ones that are on the roads and have first-hand knowledge of the conditions. After going through this process, if we determine that conditions are unsafe, then we have to cancel school.

One factor that complicates this entire process is that the weather is very unpredictable. With our current technology, weather forecasters have been much better at getting accurate forecasts than in the past. But there still may be times when we hear about a major snowstorm headed our way, only to get a couple inches of snow. Our goal is to make that decision as early as possible, so that parents can arrange for any childcare issues caused by the school cancellation. Sometimes, based on the conditions

and the advice from the road commissioners, we can make that decision that night before. However, more often than not, we have to wait until the morning to get an accurate account of the road or weather conditions. In that case, our goal is to make that decision no later than 6:00 am.

When the decision to cancel school is finally made, the last step in the process is to notify everybody of this decision. The best way to get this information is to follow Mr. Wilson on Twitter. That is generally the first place that it is posted. While Mr. Wilson is busy tweeting out that information, I notify the television and radio stations with this information. However, depending on when this decision is made and the logistics of the media outlet, that notification can sometimes be delayed. We will also send a message through our automated phone system to notify parents of this decision. If the decision is made in the morning, the earliest that we will send that call is 5:00 am.

The decision to cancel school based on the weather conditions is not one that is taken lightly. We recognize the inconvenience that this causes for parents who know have to worry about arranging childcare and other issues that may arise because your child is not in school. We recognize the inconvenience that it causes for our teachers as they try to plan for a seamless instructional setting, only to have it interrupted by a school closure. However, when balanced against the issue of student safety, we have to always make sure that the safety of our students is our top priority