

Winter Weather

December 2014

Winter is an exciting time of the year for students and staff! With only two more weeks of school until Christmas break, children, teachers, and principals are thinking of holidays and a vacation from school. As superintendent I look forward to Christmas, yet I have to remember that less daylight and colder temperatures bring the possibility of severe winter weather. When the first mention of snow or ice is announced by the media, there's only one question on the minds of teachers, parents and school-aged children: Will there be school tomorrow?

Snow days are as exciting to children as finding an unexpected present under the tree. They are days off from school for sleeping late and waking up to have snowball fights. It isn't always as exciting for parents who need to make arrangements for sitters so that they can go to work. To most people, the all-important decision to close, delay, or open schools is the most important decision a superintendent makes all year!

No matter the decision, one thing is always true; it will not please everyone. Believe it or not, this decision weighs heavily on district leaders. A retired superintendent friend once told me the thing he enjoyed most about being retired was that during threats of winter weather he could just roll over in his warm bed, go back to sleep, and let someone else worry about whether to have school or not.

Although the superintendent makes the final call, I couldn't do it without a team of people gathering data on weather conditions. When winter weather is predicted, we put our hazardous weather plan in action. Remember, we are educators, not meteorologists, so we begin early to monitor all commercial and government weather reporting outlets. We join our partners in the Whitfield County Emergency Management Agency at the 911 Center to hear updates from the National Weather Service. These meetings allow us to collaborate with the city schools, public works, and all local public safety officials to develop a unified plan of action.

We also stay in contact with neighboring school systems in northwest Georgia to see how the weather is affecting their schools and what may be coming our way. With the mountains and weather patterns in our area, conditions can change quickly. If a storm has the potential to create hazardous conditions the next day, we might make the call that evening, but we usually take it hour by hour. The majority of our students ride buses, so early morning temperatures are very important. If we must cancel school, we try to make the call before parents leave for work so children don't have to stand in the cold.

Maintenance supervisors and mechanics are always on call, and monitoring road conditions is a top priority. If we get snow or ice, employees with 4-wheel drive vehicles brave the cold to travel and check primary and secondary roads that may be dangerous for transportation. They check their designated areas early in the morning, usually between 4 and 5:30 a.m, then report back to district staff who compile a list of road problems. At the same time, we seek regular updates from the 911 Center to learn about reported slick conditions, road closures, and number of accidents.

The decision to close or delay school will ultimately be determined by the district's ability to get students and staff to school safely and to ensure buildings can be open, safe, and warm. When we have all available road information on visibility, precipitation, weather, and road conditions, I decide whether to close or delay schools. Prompt communication of the decision is critical and the latest updates will always be published on the district's website, Facebook, and Twitter feeds. We also update reporters at local newspapers, TV and radio stations. Within a few minutes of making the decision, every student and staff member with a working phone number in our student information system receives a call from me using our automated calling system.

If we decide it is safe to have school, maintenance crews and custodians spread rock salt on school sidewalks and work with Whitfield County Public Works to address ice on parking lots. Our maintenance staff checks schools to make sure no pipes are frozen and that electricity and heat are working. Mechanics are on duty to minimize bus problems, and drivers arrive early to warm the buses. Students are encouraged to wait inside wherever possible or wait in cars at the bus stop until their bus arrives.

Who knows what this winter will bring? Canceling or delaying school because of the weather is always a judgment call. While my decision may not always be the right one, I assure you it will be made with the safety of students and staff first on my mind.