

The "Snow Day" Decision

By Will Wells

As the winter months set in with the possibility of inclement weather, we begin to think more about the transportation of students on snowy roads. However, I take comfort in knowing that I have a great staff that works tirelessly to make the decision to close school with the best interest of our students in mind.

Predictions of snow make for restless nights for James Stewart, Director of Transportation for the Oldham County Schools. He wakes up periodically throughout the night to check the weather forecasts and, if the weather starts turning toward a snow event, at 3:00 a.m. he calls Rick McHargue, Chief Operations Officer, and the members of his transportation staff. This group of six people hits the roads to assess the driving conditions around the county. The team has divided the county into sections and each member drives a specific route, checking the roadways that are usually the most dangerous when snow covered.

At 5:00 a.m., the members of the group converge at the district's transportation center to meet with Mr. McHargue to discuss the situation and share their impression of the road conditions. Mr. Stewart also usually contacts the state and county highway departments to assess their progress in clearing the roads. After the group has reported in, it falls to Mr. McHargue to make the final decision whether we close schools, delay the opening, or open on schedule.

It seems that for most of the mornings when a snowstorm is happening or about to happen, a clear-cut answer isn't readily apparent. Mr. McHargue enjoys the mornings when the snow has already fallen and the decision is obvious. However, the days on which the storm is just beginning or is expected to begin are the toughest days. On those days, Mr. McHargue must place some faith into weather forecasts, which are far from an exact science. As you know, forecasts can predict large snow amounts that actually produce little, or they predict a dusting and we receive multiple inches.

Nevertheless, our administrators try to make the decision with safety as the primary concern. We have learned that it is better to err on the side of caution than to make a decision that would endanger a student, driver, or community member. When making the decision the team focuses on one question: Would you feel safe transporting students in a school bus in the current or predicted conditions?

Once the decision is made, Mr. McHargue places a call to me for confirmation. Then the notification process begins. Mr. McHargue contacts the local television and radio stations so the message will be on the newscasts by 5:30 a.m. The district webmaster is contacted so an announcement can be placed on the district web page. At 5:45 a.m., an automated telephone call is started on the telephone notification system to the households of the approximately 12,000 students and 1,800 employees of the school district. It usually takes about 45 to 55 minutes for the system to place the calls to every number.

Although the students may appreciate an unanticipated day off school, they will have to make up any missed days before the summer break can begin. While they may hate to give up a warm

summer vacation day for a school make-up day, we are willing to make that trade if we feel it's the safest option for our students.

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Superintendent