

How Do School Districts Decide To Close Schools?

The month of December has arrived and city, county and state road crews have prepared their equipment for winter weather events. As soon as severe weather is predicted, road crews throughout the Midwest begin to pretreat roads with a brine mixture and when a snow event occurs, road crews will be out on the roads throughout the night plowing snow and laying down salt and sand mix to bring the roadway back to a drivable condition. These agencies work very hard to keep the primary hard surface roads open; however, many times gravel and rock roads remain drifted shut, iced over, unsafe and impassable for several days during and after snow and ice storms. Wind with colder temperatures and frost covered ground, combined with rain, thawing, and refreezing are all conditions that school bus drivers have to deal with throughout the winter months. For superintendents and transportation directors, deciding when to run and when to keep the buses parked can be a stressful decision. With the first snow on the ground, it's a good time to take the opportunity to review how decisions are made and then communicated when the weather turns severe. The safety of students is the top priority.

Administrators must use the collected information and their own best judgment to make a decision for what is best for all students, not just the students riding on district school buses. They must factor into the equation the safety of the students that are standing at bus stops, walking to school, inexperienced teenage drivers and district staff members. At times, the decision may not fit with individual circumstances. When schools close, many families have issues with childcare. As a result, districts try to keep schools open if it's safe to do so.

How do districts decide whether or not to close due to snow, ice and extreme cold? Each district tackles this problem basically the same. Superintendents and transportation officials monitor television and radio for storm forecasts and snow predictions from regional meteorologists. For those early morning decisions, officials consult with city and county road crews sometimes before 5:00 a.m. They go out and check the road conditions and talk with their own school maintenance staff, who are out clearing parking lots, sidewalks, bus transfer points and playgrounds, along with communication with surrounding school districts. The information gained from all of these individuals is crucial in making the best decision possible for the safety of the students, staff and the public in each community.

Closing school for ice, heavy snow or blizzard conditions is easier for the public to understand; however, school officials also have to be prepared for extremely cold days. Most districts close school buildings when temperatures reach a wind chill warning of minus 45 degrees or when the actual temperature reaches negative 25 degrees. These are the toughest for the public to understand. It may be a clear day, but school has been canceled for the safety of the children that are walking to school and waiting at bus stops. They also have to consider that when a school bus or a teenager, parent or staff member's car breaks down in a rural area of the district, help takes more time to get to the stranded individual, increasing the possibility of exposure.

Closing school announcements on some occasions are made with short notice due to weather conditions changing faster than meteorologists forecasted. When possible, school administrators will make earlier notice of school closings, with the most commonly requested notice time being 10 p.m. at night so families have more time to plan. No matter what the superintendent has decided, parents have the final say. If they don't think it's safe enough for their kids to come to school, it is generally recommended that parents make other arrangements. School administrators know that student safety is always their number one priority.