

The Why and the How of Calling Snow Days

by Kraig Steinhoff

The decision I can guarantee will be correct and wrong based on the eye of the beholder is making a call on snow days or late starts for school. This winter will be my seventh year having the sole discretion of whether the district is on time, late, or canceled due to the weather conditions. My experience with this spans two school districts, one from North Dakota and the Huron School District in South Dakota. As you can imagine, the decision is not easy, fun, or foolproof. I don't take the responsibility lightly and remember my father doing the same as a superintendent with his trusty weather radio.

Dr. Randall Zitterkopf was the superintendent in Huron for seventeen years spanning from 1991 to 2008. He wrote a guest column for The School Superintendents Association titled *Snow Days and the Weather Channel*. Zitterkopf (n.d.) explained:

In my 26 years as a school administrator, the one question I probably answer most often is “Are we having school today?” — that is, when the ominous snow clouds roll in from Canada, which can happen quite often when you live in South Dakota.

As I analyze the details of my decision-making process, let me clear up some misconceptions.

First, the primary concern in forming a decision about calling off school is the safety of the students. All other factors (such as how parents will deal with child care and whether sports activities will be affected) are irrelevant.

Second, I don't own a big honkin' Hummer that will get me though the snow where other vehicles fear to tread. I do own an all-wheel-drive sedan. Actually, it belongs to Linda, my wife. When the weather is really, really bad, she lets me use the four-wheeler.

Third, the snow does not have to be up to my waist before I decide to call off school. Once upon a time, a 1st-grader asked me how deep the snow had to be before I called off school. I joked, “It has to be up to my waist.” I should have known. Be careful when trying to joke with 1st-graders. They tend to take things literally — as do some adults when they overhear some conversations.

My up-to-my-waist comment somehow became an unwritten law in the district. Because I stand 6-foot-6, my waist is up about four feet from the ground.

Fourth, I don't make the call to leave school open because I think it's the macho thing to do. I simply weigh all of the circumstances, discuss the decision to be made with others (e.g., transportation supervisor, police department, state patrol, etc.) and make the call.

Fifth, I admit to having made mistakes in my decisions. These are usually obvious even to the most casual observer. The most surefire way to make the weather turn nice is to call off school, a fact that all superintendents north of Oklahoma know (The Waist Factor section para. 1-11).

I echo many of Dr. Zitterkopf's thoughts on weather decisions. Today's weather technology and the teamwork provided by the National Weather Service of Sioux Falls are a true benefit for me. The National Weather Service sends me weather support packets up to seven days before a significant storm. Additionally, they will provide question-and-answer sessions for superintendents to help us understand

how the weather may affect our district. I believe their help and guidance allow me to make the best decision possible based on the most current predictions.

Once I have consulted with the National Weather Service and understand the forecast, it is time to make the most prudent decision to provide a 24-hour notice to our families and students. You may wonder why 24 hours is needed for advance notice. Our district is one of the most diverse in South Dakota, so communication takes more effort to ensure staff, students, and families receive the message.

Last year I decided to have a late start due to a wind chill warning. The notice went out to all staff via email, and teachers let students know before they left for the evening. We also used Facebook, Twitter, local radio, TV, and our district alert system to inform our community. The following day it was bitterly cold, and our bus drivers drove their routes in their vehicles to ensure we did not have kids standing and waiting at the bus stops. Although the announcement went out in every way possible except for carrier pigeons, we still had a handful of students waiting at the bus stops for a bus that wouldn't show up for several more hours due to the late start. Having students wait in the severe cold for a bus that won't arrive gives us another safety concern to monitor and minimize.

As we prepare for another winter in the midwest, please know that I will keep a close eye on the forecast and will strive to give a 24-hour notice if school is late or canceled. My decision will be based on the safety of our students, staff, and families. Please remember, if you feel it is unsafe for your child to go to school due to the weather conditions, you have the right to keep them home. Proper winter clothing including a winter coat, gloves/mittens, stocking hat, and boots, is essential to be prepared for the cold and snow. I know my decisions will be applauded, booed, and used as content to share on social media.

Weather-related announcements will go to all students and parents via Campus Messenger, the superintendent's Facebook and Twitter accounts, Performace Radio, Keloland, and Dakota News Now.

Reference

Zitterkoph, R.A. (n.d.). *Snow Days and the Weather Channel*. AASA.
<https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=8700>