

What philosophies or principles guide your decision making?

Inclement weather decisions are based on an assessment of the safety of transporting students to and from school by school bus. When we can transport students safely, we endeavor to open our schools because we are committed to teaching and learning.

Inclement weather decisions for the school division are made on behalf of the nearly 2,500 students we serve. We recognize that there are individual circumstances and that parents are entitled to make decisions on behalf of their own children. As with all attendance-related matters, parents electing to make alternate decisions during inclement weather events are asked to notify their child's school. Also, parents of students who drive are encouraged to direct their children to ride the school bus to have the benefit of a trained driver and a vehicle equipped with multiple safety features when conditions warrant.

What information forms the basis of your decision?

School closing or delay decisions are based on the best available weather forecasts and current information on road conditions. Ultimately the decision is only as good as the information available at the time. Inclement weather is by definition out of the ordinary, making it difficult to predict, thus subjecting decisions to considerable scrutiny.

Where do you get your weather information?

In addition to monitoring the news media and a variety of web-based forecasting resources, we speak directly with representatives of the National Weather Service in Blacksburg, VA. News and other media generally report the forecast for their respective viewing and listening areas. As a school system, we speak directly to the NWS forecasters and secure information specific to Patrick County that takes into account our geographic area, elevation, and physical geography.

Where do you get your information regarding road conditions?

Patrick County Schools enjoy many benefits from our excellent relationship with surrounding counties and VDOT. During inclement weather events, school officials maintain direct contact with Patrick County Sheriff's Office and VDOT. This communication works two ways. As VDOT makes progress with clearing the roads, measures road surface temperatures, etc. they are in contact with school officials to provide information necessary to make informed decisions. As school officials inspect roadways that have a history of being difficult to clear, we contact VDOT if/when an area needs to be cleared or requires sand or salt to assist with traction.

Do you look at what nearby divisions are doing?

We maintain contact with many nearby divisions to share forecast and road condition information, but each locality has its own specific size, physical geography, range of elevation, and capacity to clear roads. For these reasons, school closing and delay decisions are made independent of other divisions.

How do you decide whether to close, open late, or dismiss early?

In order to make decisions regarding the timing of opening and closing school, we must consider information on current conditions along with the timing of expected weather. Schools operate at certain times of the day, but inclement weather can begin, end, or

change at any time. For example, consider the timing implications of a 2-3 inch snow that arrives at the following four different times of the day.

An evening snow that concludes during the late night hours provides ample overnight time for snow removal in all areas of Patrick County, but may result in a delayed opening to permit the clearing of sidewalks and entrances at the schools.

Snow in the early morning hours, which is predicted to end after 10:00 AM would likely close schools because it would not be possible to clear roads and sidewalks in time for school to open.

Snow forecast to begin in the mid-morning is a situation where it may be necessary to announce a delayed opening. This provides school officials with additional time to gather more information in order to make a decision regarding the opening of school. However, changing an announcement is problematic and is avoided.

If the same snowfall is predicted to begin after 1:00 PM, a reasonable decision is to open schools on time, monitor the weather, and dismiss early if necessary.

Do you frequently announce a delayed opening when you are still waiting to see if you may need to close?

No, changing an announcement only occurs in rare occasions when the forecast information changes rapidly or the event is at an especially difficult time of day. When there is doubt regarding the opening of school, we generally wait as long as possible in an effort to announce the final decision. Once an announcement is made (for a two-hour delay, for example), people begin to make plans based on the information. Changing the announcement increases the chances for confusion and miscommunication. Our desire to provide one, final announcement is why we often wait until the morning of an inclement weather event to make a decision. In cases when we anticipate that an inclement weather decision may need to be reviewed, we communicate both the expected decision and proactively announce the point in time that it will be reviewed, including how additional communication will be provided if a change is necessary.

What are your considerations when the forecast is for extremely low temperatures and wind chill factors?

Extremely cold temperatures generally present greater challenges for large or rural school divisions, with long bus routes, low temperatures are generally overcome by expecting and trusting that parents will bundle their children up and keep an eye out for the bus and that our drivers will keep an eye out for younger children who may be waiting indoors. As with all weather conditions, we monitor the ambient temperature and the status of wind chill watches, advisories, and warnings from the National Weather Service. (The primary threshold for cold weather to become an operational consideration for Patrick County Public Schools is met when the National Weather Service issues a *Warning*.) We also take into account the time of year, specifically the amount of daylight available to assist our drivers and riders during morning bus runs. Lastly, if any family ever has need for winter coats, hats, or gloves, their student's School Counselor is their point of contact for assistance.

How do you know that you made the right decision?

You never know until after the inclement weather event. School administrators are in the difficult position of having to make the best possible decision using current conditions and predictions (forecasts). When the forecasts are accurate; the decision is generally deemed to be a good one. When the forecast is inaccurate, the decision will invariably be second guessed. Using multiple sources of information including first-hand observation helps provide the information needed to make an informed decision. When in doubt, we err on the side of student safety.

What about employees who live far away or who have children in other school divisions?

School closing and delay decisions are made by the central administration based on our ability to safely transport Patrick County students to and from Patrick County Schools. If Patrick County students can be safely transported to their schools, school employees are expected to be there or arrange for the appropriate leave.

An informational memorandum is sent annually to all staff summarizing Board policy EBCD to assist employees in determining their work status during school closings and delays. Employees with special, individual circumstances are encouraged to make arrangements with their principal or supervisor.

Are there a certain number of snow days you try to get each year?

No, we develop a school calendar based on the Code of Virginia, on what we believe best supports student learning, and on the needs of our community. Snow days are an interruption and we would prefer to not have any interruptions.

Philosophy of Operation

The general philosophy of the Patrick County School Division concerning school schedules is to always place the safety of students and employees as first priority. The division strives to operate its schools on a regular and consistent daily schedule to promote maximum student learning and general operational efficiency. Because of Patrick County's large geographical area covering 486 square miles and the wide disparity in elevation throughout the county, weather patterns vary a great deal during the seasons of the year, especially during the winter.

In the process of making the decision to alter the school schedule, we also consider and make use of bus-routing options. When appropriate, we have buses in some areas of the county run on a different schedule to avoid penalizing the schedule for the entire school division.

Making the decision to alter the school division's schedule is in no way an exact science and is usually not easy, but we always try to "err" on the side of safety.

Procedure/Timeline for Decision Making

Delayed Schedule

3:30 A.M. — Director of Transportation Starts Checking Roads

The Director of Transportation drives routes to check conditions of roads that several buses would be traveling. These roads are the most rural roads, and they include roads in the Ararat, Stella, and the Meadows of Dan area. The Meadows of Dan area seems to get more of the harsh weather due to their elevation.

5:00 A.M. — Re-Check Weather Conditions

The Director of Transportation checks the weather forecast again for the day. He then calls drivers that live in Meadows of Dan and other areas (including consulting with bordering districts) asks for an update on the road conditions near their homes. If things have changed drastically, some of the roads are then checked again.

5:00 – 5:15 A.M. — Superintendent Notified of Road Conditions by Director of Transportation

The Director of Transportation calls the Superintendent to provide an update on the situations that have been experienced thus far. A decision is then made about schedule alterations.

5:15 – 5:30 A.M. — Calls to Radio/Television Stations, Etc.

If an altered schedule is needed, the Superintendent's Administrative Assistant begins calling radio and television stations.

Each station has a specific code assigned to our school district. Once all stations are notified and the correct codes are entered with the schedule alteration that Patrick County Schools will be experiencing, the School Closing Hotline is updated (276-251-3154) The Superintendent sends out a message using School Messenger, Facebook, and updates the Patrick County Schools' website.

7:00 – 8:00 A.M. — Delayed Schedule to Closed

If the delayed schedule needs to be changed to "closed", the Superintendent's administrative assistant will call radio and television stations. The Superintendent sends out a message using School Messenger, Facebook, and updates the Patrick County Schools' website.

Early Dismissal

There are times when the daily school schedule must be altered after the school day has begun. These “early dismissals” may be caused by inclement weather or other emergencies which necessitate guarding student and staff safety. When the school administration is alerted to the possible need to dismiss school early, communication is initiated immediately with agencies and individuals who are knowledgeable of the situation creating the emergency. Information is gathered quickly by school administrators, and a careful analysis of the facts is conducted before the Superintendent of Schools makes the decision to dismiss early.

Once this decision is made, the same media that are used for a “delayed schedule” are used by school administrators to notify parents, staff and others of the decision. Every effort is made to make this call in a timely manner to allow for adjustments in schedules and arrangements for the safety of students and staff.

Emphasis on Safety of Students and Employees

Safety of students on buses and students driving, along with school employees, is of the utmost importance in determining school schedule changes. Other important factors are whether a road is snow and/or ice covered and if there is a forecast of more snow or ice to come.

Example: Roads might be snow/ice covered at 5:00 a.m. with forecasts showing more snow/ice to come, and there would be a need to close schools; however, if roads are snow covered and the forecast is calling for the snow to stop and the temperature to rise, it is usually only necessary to go on a two (2) or three (3) hour delay. Forecasts are not always accurate, so it is necessary to continue checking roads throughout the morning on a day of delayed schedule.

Note: A three-hour delay is only expected to be used in early fall/winter and late winter/spring when temperatures may rise quickly after sunrise.

The goal is to have the announcement of school alteration to radio/television stations by 5:30 a.m. If the delayed schedule needs to be changed to closed, notification will be between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. This helps parents that may need to make alternate arrangements for their child(ren) due to the school alterations that have been made.