

Snow Days: Whether or Not to Weather The Storm

From The Superintendent

Prior to my days as a Board of Education central office employee, I was just like any other parent or school district employee before a weather event. I would wait and wonder, *Would I be going to work on time and would the students go to school? Would my son have the same schedule – delayed or closed – as I did, or would I have to figure that complication into the day?* I would wake up early and wait for the automated call or watch the morning news as the closings scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Toward the end of my son's school years and my years working as a teacher and building administrator, I was even able to check the website for the answer.

Prior to assuming my post as Superintendent of Schools for Old Saybrook, I often wondered what went into making such a decision. Some days, I stayed home and the snow never arrived, some days there would be a delay but it seemed a cancellation would have been better. Now, as Superintendent, the person responsible for making this decision, I can tell you with all certainty, while there is a detailed process involved, there is no special magic or crystal ball to assist me. There is only the same information everyone else uses when making a weather related decision. Anyone who has ever planned an outdoor activity understands the position I find myself in early in the morning prior to or during a weather event. Just like cancelling a backyard barbeque, cancelling school comes with consequences and the weightiness of those consequences are always considered. As a mom, I understand that while your child's safety is always first, a delay or cancellation comes with last minute rearranging of work schedules and/or incurring additional childcare cost. If the weather has been causing interruption to the school calendar, lost instructional time is also a concern. These decisions are not made lightly and are derived from the analysis of real-time information from different sources.

The process begins at 3:00 a.m. I wish there were access to a special weather station for superintendents but none exist. The day begins with a check in with the National Weather Service (N.O.A.A.) website to review updated alerts and the early news.

By 4:15 a.m., superintendents from our area begin conferring with each other through texts, phone calls and emails. Next, if the troubling weather has already started, I contact the Old Saybrook Police and get real-time road conditions from the on-duty police sergeant. The Sergeant shares with me, through the dispatcher, the road conditions in different areas of town. I also ask The Director of Public Works about the status of road clearing operations and converse with a representative of the bus company. Some mornings, the bus company that serves Old Saybrook puts an empty bus on the road to see if skidding and slipping of the vehicle occurs on the hills and back roads along bus routes.

By 5:00 to 5:30 a.m., the superintendents from the area contact each other again. We share and compare information and reports from our local agencies. Some towns do not have a police department so they appreciate the road reports those of us with town departments can share.

Next, it's time to call the school district's Operations, Facilities and Finance Director. She has been in communication with the head custodians and can advise about clean up time, parking lot conditions or extenuating circumstances at any of our buildings.

Finally, there is one more check of the weather report and a few more texts to colleagues and a final decision is usually ready to air. When all the information provides an unclear picture, it is best to err on the side of caution. We post to the website, notify the television stations and activate our automated call system. The process is thorough but certainly not without flaws since the weather doesn't always behave as the meteorologists thought it would. No matter the decision, the day officially begins with the knowledge that the best information available was gathered and utilized. but, as Mark Twain said, "If you don't like the weather in New England now, just wait a few minutes."