



DELAYS AND CLOSURES IN SEVERE WEATHER: SCHOOLS' DECISION PROCESS

Winter 2014 was a rough one for many, as inclement weather hit Texas hard. Schools had to make decisions whether to operate normally, run on delay, or close the school. Most Texas districts experienced at least two days in which school was closed or delayed. Parents are accustomed to checking the news for closure announcements and phones for automated alerts from the school. Whether parents cheer because it means a “snow day” at home or groan they must scramble to make contingency plans, most of what goes on behind the scenes for the school to arrive at that decision is unknown.

For schools, the emergency weather closing process is complicated, but one thing is simple: The first priority is student safety. Above all, district staff focuses on the health, safety, and welfare of students. Many factors are carefully analyzed when the schools decide whether to delay opening or close a school:

- Consultations with local emergency management groups and weather experts. Most times, monitoring usually begins more than 24 hours prior to the forecasted inclement weather.
- Information on road conditions from transportation staff and local law enforcement officials. District personnel begin driving roads between 3-4 a.m. to determine the degree of iciness and road safety. The school district gives careful consideration to the most dangerous roads in the district. Though the streets in your neighborhood may look clear, other streets in the district may be dangerous. In addition, school districts are aware of the risk to the least experienced drivers— high school students.
- Amount of snow or ice accumulated, projected accumulations, and whether precipitation is continuing.

- Building temperature conditions, such as whether there is any interruption in our buildings' electricity and heat. Some districts must determine the regional availability of natural gas to heat schools.
- Parking lot conditions. If the school parking lots can't be cleared and treated before school starts, parents' vehicles and school buses can't navigate safely in the parking lots, which causes dangerous conditions for students, parents, and bus drivers.
- Temperature and wind chill. Some students walk or ride bicycles to and from school, and some have to wait outside in the harsh weather at their bus stop.
- Weather predictions. Meteorologists' predictions are a calculated guess about the future and can be inaccurate—especially in Texas—but forecasts are taken into account.
- What area school districts and universities are doing. While every district is unique in its circumstances, district staff does monitor what nearby districts are doing to help guide the decision-making process.

The superintendent makes the final decision, based on the above factors and recommendations from district staff. Then the public is notified via local radio and TV stations, the district website, and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Districts send text messages, e-mails, and automated phone calls to parents of the registered students and staff. Districts are aware that waiting too long to make the decision affects parents' ability to make childcare arrangements, and also affects district staff who are scheduled to arrive hours before school starts.

Most districts make every effort to make a decision by 5:30 a.m. or earlier so that parents and staff can be notified by 6 a.m. When severe weather is a certainty, the decision is made the night before.

If school is already in session and severe weather, such as a tropical storm or hurricane, develops, a whole other set of variables enters the decision-making process. Schools then have to take protective measures to ensure the safety of the students in their care during the adverse weather. It's not a simple decision to dismiss early, because in some cases, early dismissal causes parents to drive to pick up their children in dangerous weather.

The decision to delay or cancel school is never easy, especially when school administration must then deal with the aftermath of rescheduling makeup days in an already tight school calendar, and frustrated parents who disagree with the decision to close. One thing parents and schools can always agree on: we all want to keep the children safe.

