

How Do I Call a Snow Day? Let Me Count the Ways

BEFORE TAKING ON THIS ROLE, I always heard retiring superintendents say they would not miss deciding whether to close school due to increment weather. Snow days are difficult because canceling school is one of those decisions that never pleases everyone. If there were a course on “How to be a Superintendent,” a full week would be devoted to the art and science of declaring a snow day. After living through the experience a few times in the last two winters, I thought I might offer a “behind-the-scenes” glimpse of this middle-of-the-night decision-making process.

It all begins a few days prior to the weather event when local newscasts predict impending storms will end civilization as we know it. As the storm approaches and I am visiting grade schools, students (and some staff) tell me they will wear their pajamas inside out that night to ensure tomorrow is a snow day. I hesitate to tell them that, if such a ritual really worked, many principals would also wear their pajamas inside out — even in June.

The night before the predicted storm, our maintenance, grounds, and communications crews go on alert. They know a series of rapid confabs will occur between 2 – 5 a.m. Since many high school students trudge to their bus stops as early as 6:15 a.m. and our staff who live in outlying suburbs may begin their commutes long before dawn, a decision is necessary by 5:15 a.m. to notify everyone in a timely manner.

Admittedly, some weather-related verdicts are easier than others. Extreme cold can be a constant and is unlikely to change dramatically in a short period. A tremendous snowstorm with accumulating drifts and high winds is an obvious call. In those clear cases, the safety of students comes first. The harder decisions are when one

weather channel shows the storm tracking south while another predicts a direct hit. Worse yet is when the temperature fluctuates between 31 and 33 degrees, and the radar shows our school district on the line dividing big blobs of green and pink. A two-degree differential sometimes means the difference between rain and four feet of snow.

At 2:30 a.m., I awake to consult every Internet weather map I can find. Around 4 a.m., the phone calls begin. First, the bus company updates its status. The Building and Grounds Department then reports the condition of our school parking lots. If the storm is in its early stages, the calls fly fast and furious between superintendents of neighboring school districts. There is comfort in numbers.

Sometimes the conversations resemble a pack of playground prognosticators. “What do you think?” one may ask. “Not sure; I heard Bob is 90 percent certain he’s going to close.” “Well, I’ll go if Bob goes. Let me call Sue to see what she thinks.” “I heard Bill is staying open, but you know Bill — last year he stayed open and had to shut down mid-morning. I don’t want to do that.” “OK, I’ll close if you close.” “You sure — you will close, right?” “Ummm, let me check one more time with Bob.” When in doubt, this deliberation lasts about an hour. Around 5 a.m., everybody locks in one way or the other.

The decision to cancel school initiates a sequence of quick calls to update the Web site, notify radio and TV, and instantly alert parents and staff. If closing, you hope the storm really does occur; if staying open, you hope the storm dissipates and everyone arrives safely.

Last year, when we made the decision to call off school the night before due to frigid temperatures, the recorded instant alert messages

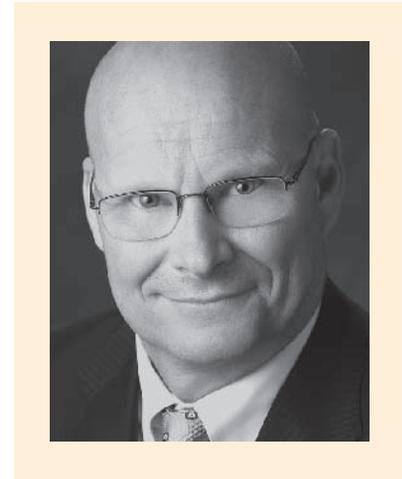


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Dr. Tom Leonard is the superintendent of District 220 schools. He can be reached at tleonard@cusd220.org or by phone at 847-842-3588.

went out about 9:15 p.m. Later I learned, at that moment, there were about 40 people in a local pizzeria whose cell phones rang simultaneously. As soon as a few students heard my voice with the announcement, cheers rose up throughout the establishment. I’ve never been so popular.

I understand how closing school can inconvenience parents if they must arrange last-minute child care. Students (and staff), on the other hand, often welcome snow days and the free time they bring. For me, winter weather means rising in the middle of the night to analyze forecasts and driving conditions, and to join my counterparts in wavering like wind-blown snowflakes. I agree with comedian Rob Reiner who said, “A lot of people like snow, but I find it to be an unnecessary freezing of water.” Evidently, he also did not believe in wearing his pajamas inside out. 