

Journal 28

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When It Snows

Hello. I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System. With the winter vacation upon us, it's a good time to talk about what may happen in the event of inclement weather.

In my perfect world, we would have beautiful snow on the weekends and clear and safe roads on the weekdays. But we know that it doesn't always happen that way in North Carolina. Our climate changes from year to year. We've had uneventful winters, massive snowfalls, and none of us will forget January 19, 2005, when a half-inch of snow at just the right temperature and time snarled Wake County traffic for hours and stranded some of our students in schools with staff and volunteers who did a great job of keeping them safe and comfortable until we could get them home.

Whatever the situation, our school system has procedures in place for assessing weather conditions and responding appropriately. Canceling classes due to snow and ice can disrupt learning, and it can be expensive. However, these considerations have to take a back seat to student safety.

As a general rule, I believe in making weather-related decisions as early as possible in order to allow us to communicate fully with our parents, principals and staff. Inclement weather systems don't always cooperate with my strategy, but we will work to err on the side of caution.

When we are facing a weather event, we monitor weather reports and road conditions, and we talk to local forecasters, law enforcement, and other state and local agencies. Our transportation department supervisors drive the bus routes both on primary streets and secondary roads to ensure they are safe for our buses. It is important to remember that many of our bus routes are through neighborhoods and subdivisions. Even after the major highways are clear, there can be hazardous conditions on the side streets.

After taking all these different sources of information into consideration, I make the determination whether to have school, cancel classes, open late, or dismiss early. Here's what happens next.

Our inclement weather team is activated to communicate, monitor and manage the situation.

The WCPSS website will announce our closing, delay, or early dismissal, while we simultaneously alert our principals.

Parents who have subscribed to our e-mail notification service will receive e-mail and text alerts. If you haven't done so already, you can sign up on the front page of our website.

And then we notify the media so they can help us inform the broader community.

It's important to remember that if classes are canceled or dismissed early, all athletic, community use and continuing education events are canceled as well.

If schools are closed, you can check your instructional calendar for a list of make-up days, which will be used in the order they appear. State law requires that there be 180 instructional days in the year, and 1,000 hours of instruction. The law includes a number of restrictions on when make-up days can be held. Student absences on those make-up days do count.

For year-round schools, the Saturday immediately following the inclement weather is usually chosen for a make-up day. This helps maintain the instructional pacing for student learning, and accommodates all three tracks that were out of school at the same time.

There are three important things parents need to remember about inclement weather. First, it's VERY important to provide accurate emergency contact information to your child's school. If it's changed since the start of the year, please let your school know. Second, talk with friends and neighbors about contingency plans should we need to release early or start the day a few hours later. Finally, take advantage of our emergency notification services by going to our Website at www.wcpss.net and clicking the link on our front page.

Hopefully this will be a safe and pleasant winter. And, as always, we'll do everything we can to keep your child safe during inclement weather.

Thanks, and I'll talk to you again soon.