

Closing or Delaying School for Inclement Weather

One of the most challenging responsibilities as Superintendent of schools is making the decision regarding school delays or cancellations. The geographical location of our school district, along with the varied conditions from Lower Milford, Coopersburg, and some outlying areas in Upper Saucon Township, create a challenge during inclement, wintry weather.

I want to share the process that is followed in making inclement weather decisions in Southern Lehigh. I hope that this information will help you understand this process and minimize the frustration associated with not knowing how decisions are made or the complexity of dealing with variable weather predictions and road conditions.

In much the same manner as everyone else, we learn about approaching weather conditions from television, radio, and computer reports. Once the weather alert occurs, our Transportation and Support Services Departments begin to make preparations. Generally, we meet up to 24 hours in advance to create a strategy for potential storms.

If inclement weather is occurring in the evening or overnight, our transportation subcontractor will have drivers out at about 3:00 a.m. First, they will check those roads that are typically most problematic. Our school district spans 47 square miles and varies greatly in road and weather conditions. By 4:15 a.m., our Director of Support Services and I begin coordination. Local AccuWeather SkyGuard Meteorologists and the National Weather Service send us updates or are contacted for weather conditions and forecasts. At the same time, we will be speaking with the municipalities and Penn Dot about their plowing/ciddering/salting schedules. We also speak to key personnel in surrounding school districts to identify any information that may be helpful. By 4:45-5:00 a.m., the decision process begins. Superintendents throughout Lehigh County are in communication and share local reports. We must consider conditions to non-public schools, LCTI, and special programs some of our students attend throughout the county.

Typically, by 5:15-5:30 a.m., we will have gathered the most current information that is available. This information, along with our knowledge of Southern Lehigh School District demographics is used to make the decision regarding closure or delays:

- Weather conditions vary greatly across the district. (Please remember that driving a bus filled with children on slick roads is different than driving a personal vehicle, and while main roads tend to be cleared quickly, back roads throughout the district may not have been treated.)
- We have in excess of 1,000 bus stops.
- Our buses will travel in excess of 3,500 miles during a school day.
- We transport approximately 3,600 students per day (about 500 students are transported to locations other than our schools).
- Our buses will be operating within the typical traffic flow.
- Many of our bus stops may be affected by snow plowing.

- Our Grounds Department will need a minimum of 4 hours time to plow parking lots and clear walkways.

Based upon all the data a decision will be made by 5:30 a.m. Once that decision is made regarding a delay or cancellation, we start to make the necessary contacts. The message is posted to our web site home page at www.slsd.org.

Radio and television stations are notified and key personnel are called. We also be utilize our electronic alert phone/email system so staff and parents will receive a phone, email, or text message to the number(s) and email address(s) designated for this purpose. Parents now have the ability to change or select their preferred means to be contacted through the BlackBoard Connect Parent Portal. Directions on how to update or change information can be found by following directions posted on the website: <http://www.slsd.org/parents.cfm?subpage=430888>, or by contacting your school.

In most cases, we will make ONE decision early in the morning- to close or delay- and that will be final plan for the day. We believe this is easier for most parents as you make plans for the day. Once in a great while the timing of a weather event is such that buying a little extra time with a delay MIGHT allow us to safely open school. In these rare events, the message will state that we will provide an update by a certain time. The same means of communication will be used to provide an update when necessary.

We try our best to avoid early dismissals as we recognize the challenges working parents face when this occurs. Again, we rely heavily on the forecasts provided by our local AccuWeather SkyGuard Meteorologists and the National Weather Service and make decisions based upon the same information as indicated above.

Please remember- it is the responsibility of parents / guardians to make arrangements for the care of your children in the event that we do need to close or delay our schools for weather or any other potential emergency situation.

This information is being shared to provide you with some insight into what happens behind the scenes during winter weather events in Southern Lehigh. Please know that student safety is the ultimate focus of these decisions. We appreciate your understanding and support in these decisions. We will always do our best to keep schools open but must consider many factors for the safety of our students. Given this responsibility, we will always err on the side of caution in making weather-related decisions. No decision is more important.

Let's all hope for a mild winter season and continually safe road conditions!

Dr. Leah M. Christman

Superintendent