

Everything that you ever wanted to know about Snow Days (and more!)

As we enter the season of “inclement weather” the odds are that you’ll be getting one of those 5am phone calls announcing that school is closed for the day. I thought now would be a good time to explain some of the factors that go into closing or delaying school because of bad weather.

Our top priority is making sure that all students and staff can get to and from all of our schools safely. With the first staff members arriving around 7am at PMHS and the last ones leaving after 4pm at Valley Park we have a large window of time when conditions have to be appropriate. In addition, our custodial and maintenance crew needs several hours to get all of the parking lots cleared and the sidewalks prepared so cars can park/leave, buses can drop off/pick up students and people can walk in/out of our buildings without slipping. All of those time constraints factor into a decision to delay or close schools.

Who makes the decision to close, delay or open schools?

As the Superintendent that decision ultimately rests with me. That being said, I talk to a LOT of people before the decision gets made and look at a lot of weather forecasts.

When does the decision to cancel or delay school get made?

It depends on when the storm is coming. In a few cases, conditions are so bad the evening before that we know we won’t be able to open schools safely the next day. In that scenario, I try to notify everyone by 9 pm the night before.

However, the decision usually comes by 5am on the day of a weather event for two main reasons:

- a.) that’s when I have the most up-to-date information as close to the start of school as possible
- b.) it’s the latest I can call school off and give people time to make child care arrangements for the day.

That approach may not work for every one of our 2,000 families (some would like more notice, some would like a later call, etc.) but it’s the best we can do. We’re trying to balance giving ample notice to families with making a decision based on the most accurate information that we can get. The more we have of one, the less we have of the other.

Where do you get the information from to make a delayed/closing decision?

Like everybody else, I depend on weather forecasts (for better and for worse!). I get them from multiple sources including Salem County Emergency Management. That

being said, my ability to “predict” what the weather will do is only as good as what I hear from the forecasters. As a result, we will never be 100% accurate in deciding on whether the school day schedule gets affected by weather.

I check in with our maintenance staff throughout the night, remotely assessing parking lot conditions through school cameras and feedback from maintenance texts. (Our maintenance staff is usually up all night plowing the parking lots so that they aren’t overwhelmed with all of the accumulation at once. It’s much easier to plow a few inches multiple times than significant accumulation all at once.) In addition to getting updates from staff members who live in town, I also check in with the Pennsville Police Department before 5am about road conditions since they are out driving on them throughout the night.

The toughest storms to make a decision on are the ones that are just beginning as the day starts. Calling off school at 5am when there’s not a flake on the ground but dire predictions from every forecaster is not my favorite part of the job. As a result, we may not get it right every time but we err on the side of caution.

How are a school delay or an early dismissal determined and what are the effects?

Almost every delayed-opening will be a two-hour delay (as opposed to only an hour). We need that extra time (after a storm that ends before school starts) to prepare the parking lots and sidewalks while giving time for road conditions to improve. A two-hour delay still enables us to meet the legal requirement for a school day. Everything happens just as it would with a normal day except that the bus arrives two hours later, school starts two hours later, etc. and then school dismisses at the normal time.

An unscheduled early dismissal occurs only during a true emergency. Sending young children home early with little notification to parents is not a step that we would take without great need.

What happens when the Governor declares a state of emergency?

As we all know, North Jersey is a world away in many ways. Sometimes decisions are made in Trenton that don’t make sense for the whole state. Usually, when a Governor declares a state of emergency opening schools is still a local decision. However, there are circumstances where the Governor can close down all non-essential services in the state. The result is that schools can be open depending on what is specifically ordered by a governor.

Where can we get information about school closings or delays?

The old days of watching one news channel and waiting a half-hour, hoping to catch your school when it scrolls by the bottom of the screen, are over. First, all district families and

staff get a School Reach message from me letting them know if school is closed or delayed. That message goes out through a phone call, email and text message. In addition, the news is posted on the district website.

Is the decision to close or delay Pennsville schools affected by other school districts?

Pennsville can make the decision to open, delay or close independently of any other school district. Some Salem County school districts may need to discuss their plans with others since they share students (K-8 “sending” districts), buses, provide lunch for each other, etc.

The only factor that affects Pennsville is whether Salem County VoTech will be operational on a particular day. The “rule of thumb” has always been that the VoTech stays open if three county high schools are open. In the event that we open on a day that VoTech isn’t operational we simply create an alternative schedule for those students for that day.

All of the Superintendents in the county do participate in a conference call by 5am to share information and perspectives. Ultimately, though, each Superintendent is responsible for the decision for his/her own district. Each school district has different factors that determine whether they can open on a particular day: the amount of students who walk, busing issues, contract issues, etc. Also, Salem County encompasses a large area. Living in Pittsgrove, I can assure you that the weather 45 miles to the east can be very different from what it is in western Salem County near the river. Different conditions lead to different decisions. My job is to make the best decision that I can for Pennsville.

How does a change in the school calendar affect the decision to cancel school?

It doesn’t. A longer school year to make up snow days means that we have to deal with the reality of hot classrooms in June with no air conditioning. It also means that there could be disruptions to family vacations (always remember, the school year can legally run through June 30th!). Those factors might seem to add pressure to any decision to close, but they don’t. Quite simply, the decision comes down to whether it’s safe to open schools on a particular day and then we deal with the side effects of a decision to close.

In conclusion...

Well, that’s probably more than you ever wanted to know about school closings in Pennsville but I thought I would share some of the factors that go into the decision-making. Hopefully, we’ll have a calm winter, but in case we don’t please know that the safety of our students and staff members is always our top priority.