

Inclement Weather Decisions

What philosophies or principles guide your decision making?

Inclement weather decisions are based on an assessment of the safety of transporting students to and from school by school bus. When we can transport students safely, we endeavor to open our schools because we are committed to teaching and learning. *Additionally, we evaluate the condition of school parking lots and school sidewalks and the condition of public sidewalks and other routes of students who must walk or ride bikes to school.*

Inclement weather decisions for the school division are made on behalf of the nearly 3,000 students we serve. We recognize that there are individual circumstances and that parents are entitled to make decisions on behalf of their own children. As with all attendance-related matters, parents electing to make alternate decisions during inclement weather events are asked to notify their child's school. Also, parents of students who *drive walk or ride bikes to school* are encouraged to *transport their child to school* or direct their children to ride the school bus to have the benefit of a trained driver and a vehicle equipped with multiple safety features when conditions warrant.

What information forms the basis of your decision?

School closing or delay decisions are based on the best available weather forecasts and current information on road conditions. Ultimately the decision is only as good as the information available at the time. Inclement weather is by definition out of the ordinary, making it difficult to predict, thus subjecting decisions to considerable scrutiny.

Where do you get your weather information?

In addition to monitoring the news media and a variety of web-based forecasting resources, we speak directly with representatives of the National Weather Service in Wakefield, VA. News and other media generally report the forecast for their respective viewing and listening areas. As a school system, we speak directly to the NWS forecasters and secure information specific to Colonial Heights that takes into account our small geographic area, elevation, and physical geography.

Where do you get your information regarding road, school parking lot and school sidewalk conditions?

The Colonial Heights Public Schools enjoy many benefits from our excellent relationship with the City Administration. When bad weather is forecast, there is outstanding coordination and communication between city departments and the school system. A terrific *Public Works - Street Maintenance* Department combined with a relatively small geographic area give Colonial Heights considerable snow removal capacity.

During inclement weather events, school officials maintain direct radio contact with the Colonial Heights Street Department and the Colonial Heights Police Department *and Fire Department*. This communication works two ways. As the street department makes progress with clearing the roads, measures road surface temperatures, etc. they are in contact with

school officials to provide information necessary to make informed decisions. As school officials inspect roadways that have a history of being difficult to clear, we radio the street department if/when an area needs to be cleared or requires sand or salt to assist with traction. *The school maintenance department assesses and clears and treats school parking lots and school sidewalks.*

Do you look at what nearby divisions are doing?

We maintain contact with many nearby divisions to share forecast and road condition information, but each locality has its own specific size, physical geography, range of elevation, and capacity to clear roads *and school sites*. For these reasons, school closing and delay decisions are made independent of other divisions.

How do you decide whether to close, open late, or dismiss early?

In order to make decisions regarding the timing of opening and closing school, we must consider information on current conditions along with the timing of expected weather. Schools operate at certain times of the day, but inclement weather can begin, end, or change at any time. For example, consider the timing implications of a 2-3 inch snow that arrives at the following four different times of the day:

- An evening snow that concludes during the late night hours provides ample overnight time for snow removal in Colonial Heights, but may result in a delayed opening to permit the clearing of sidewalks and entrances at the schools.
- Snow in the early morning hours, which is predicted to end after 10:00 AM would likely close schools because it would not be possible to clear roads and sidewalks in time for school to open.
- Snow forecast to begin in the mid-morning is a situation where it may be necessary to announce a delayed opening. This provides school officials with additional time to gather more information in order to make a decision regarding the opening of school. However, changing an announcement is problematic, but may be necessary if conditions worsen.
- If the same snowfall is predicted to begin after 1:00 PM, a reasonable decision is to open schools on time, monitor the weather, and dismiss early if necessary.

Do you frequently announce a delayed opening when you are still waiting to see if you may need to close?

No, changing an announcement only occurs in rare occasions when the forecast information changes rapidly or the event is at an especially difficult time of day. When there is doubt regarding the opening of school, we generally wait as long as possible in an effort to announce the final decision. Once an announcement is made (for a two-hour delay, for example), people

begin to make plans based on the information. Changing the announcement increases the chances for confusion and miscommunication. Our desire to provide one, final announcement is why we often wait until the morning of an inclement weather event to make a decision. In cases when we anticipate that an inclement weather decision may need to be reviewed, we communicate both the expected decision and proactively announce the point in time that it will be reviewed, including how additional communication will be provided if a change is necessary.

What are your considerations when the forecast is for extremely low temperatures and wind chill factors?

Extremely cold temperatures generally present greater challenges for large or rural school divisions, with long bus routes where contingencies must be in place for buses that do not start or may break down in remote areas. Thanks to our relatively small geographic area, use of multiple bus runs that provide more stops in closer proximity for our youngest riders, and the fact that all of our buses are housed at a central garage low, temperatures are generally overcome by expecting and trusting that parents will bundle their children up and keep an eye out for the bus and that our drivers will keep an eye out for younger children who may be waiting indoors. As with all weather conditions, we monitor the ambient temperature and the status of wind chill watches, advisories, and warnings from the National Weather Service. (The primary threshold for cold weather to become an operational consideration for Colonial Heights Public Schools is met when the National Weather Service issues a *Warning*.) We also take into account the time of year, specifically the amount of daylight available to assist our drivers and riders during morning bus runs. Lastly, if any family ever has need for winter coats, hats, or gloves, their student's School Counselor is their point of contact for assistance.

How do you know that you made the right decision?

You never know until after the inclement weather event. School administrators are in the difficult position of having to make the best possible decision using current conditions and predictions (forecasts). When the forecasts are accurate; the decision is generally deemed to be a good one. When the forecast is inaccurate, the decision will invariably be second guessed. Using multiple sources of information including first-hand observation helps provide the information needed to make an informed decision. When in doubt, we err on the side of student safety.

What plans are in place if there is a sudden change while the students are in school?

This is another example of where our great relationship with the City is essential. During an early/emergency release, schools remain open and staffed until verification has been received from the Director of Transportation that all buses serving the school have completed their run and safely transported all students home.

What about employees who live far away or who have children in other school divisions?

School closing and delay decisions are made by the central administration based on our ability to safely transport Colonial Heights students to and from Colonial Heights Schools. If Colonial Heights students can be safely transported to their schools, school employees are expected to be there or arrange for the appropriate leave.

Are there a certain number of snow days you try to get each year?

No, we develop a school calendar based on the Code of Virginia, on what we believe best supports student learning, and on the needs of our community. Snow days are an interruption and we would prefer to not have any interruptions.

“The superintendent or superintendent’s designee may order the closing, the delay in opening or the early dismissal of any or all schools in order to protect the safety and welfare of the students and staff.” (Policy EBCD)

The administration shall devise adequate plans for notifying students and parents in the event that weather conditions are the cause for closing the school.

Procedures for Emergency Closing of Schools

1. Closing of School Because of Inclement Weather/Other Emergencies

Every attempt will be made to reach a decision by 6:00 AM. When a decision is made, the media will be informed and asked to disseminate the information. When feasible, the announcement will be made the night before. *The Division has the ability to issue an automated phone call to parents and pertinent information is posted on our web sites and through social media.*

Once a decision is made to close the schools because of inclement weather, one of the following two decisions will be made and announced:

In the first instance, a decision is made that school will be closed for students and for staff whose contracts are based on student days. These staff members include all employees on ten and eleven-month terms of employment or less. These staff members will make up the missed day when the student day is made up. In this instance, twelve-month staff, maintenance and custodial staff are required to report to work as soon as possible.

In the second instance, a decision is made that the entire school division will be closed for all personnel due to severe weather conditions. Exceptions will be made for certain administrative, custodial, maintenance, and clerical personnel with whom arrangements will be made separately. Those individuals include the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, school principals, and selected clerical staff in the central office. In such instances, other twelve-month staff will be advised by telephone not to report to work.

Delayed Opening of School Because of Inclement Weather or Other Emergencies

In the case of delayed openings, all staff should report on the late schedule except for certain administrative, custodial, cafeteria, maintenance, and clerical personnel who are needed to prepare the schools for opening. Those individuals include the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, school principals, assistant principals, custodians, cafeteria staff, maintenance and clerical staff in the central office and schools who hold twelve-month notices of employment. These individuals should report to their posts on their normal schedule or as soon thereafter as conditions will permit.

Employees contracted for less than 6.0 hours per day:

Employees who are contracted for less than 6.0 hours shall work their assigned number of hours on delayed openings. Work schedules may need to be adjusted and should be discussed with the supervisor in advance, except in cases of emergency. This applies to school bus drivers, school bus aides, part-time instructional assistants, part-time food service staff, cafeteria monitors, and part-time custodial staff. Employees will be compensated for time worked.

Closing of School During School Session Due to Inclement Weather or Other Emergencies

In those cases when severe weather conditions or other potential emergencies may have implications affecting the closing of schools, the decision to continue operation or to close the schools is made by the Superintendent. This decision is based primarily upon the consideration of student welfare and safety.

During that period of time that the schools are in session, the responsibility for the safety and supervision of students as well as for their instruction is incumbent upon every staff member. No teacher or other licensed employee is authorized to leave his or her assigned duties until this responsibility has been fulfilled. Any deviation from this procedure is to be reported to the Superintendent by the principal for such corrective action as may be appropriate.

In the case of early closings, the staff will be released to leave work when students have departed and provisions have been made for the security and safety of the buildings. School administrative staff, the Assistant Superintendent, and the Superintendent must remain until buses have completed their assigned runs. Depending upon the weather event selective maintenance employees may also be asked to stay. Evening shift custodians are to report to work if weather conditions permit.

Compensatory time or overtime may be granted on an individual basis when staff members are required to work beyond the number of days and hours required in contracts or notices of employment.

Cancellation, Delay, or Rescheduling of Activities and Meetings

1. If the Superintendent announces an all-day closing of schools, evening activities will also be cancelled.
2. The principal/department administrator will determine whether scheduled school activities should be delayed, cancelled, or rescheduled.