

GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Superintendent's Corner

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The use of 'Alternative Structured Learning Days' (what we know as "Blizzard Bag Days") has engendered much interest across the Commonwealth to help alleviate making up weather-related school cancellations in late June. For the first time the joint Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and the Massachusetts Association of Superintendents (MASS) put into their scheduled meetings a session on Blizzard Bags for which I was asked to be one of the four panel presenters.

The panel makeup was very interesting, myself and the Superintendent of the Westfield Public Schools, a school committee member from the City of Melrose and a school committee member and parent from the Orange Elementary School District. This allowed for a range of implementation strategies, success stories, modifications over time and how the programs are run. There was a good turnout of individuals in the session and many interesting questions for the panel.

It is interesting to note some differences in how blizzard bags are done in each district including the number of days (this ranged from 3 to an unlimited amount), when they were to be implemented (starting and counting from the first cancellation to not beginning until after the five 'built-in' snow days were used, how staff were considered to be working on those days to the potential savings (only Gateway had a specific savings amount calculated for these days). A universal theme was the idea that parents, students and staff seemed to be much more supportive of blizzard bags as the programs went on, operational questions were answered, and everyone became used to the idea. While everyone was interested in seeing these blizzard bag assignments being digital, almost everyone is using a mix of electronic and paper versions of the assignments due to the lack of broadband access to the lack of a one to one laptop program.

There were several common questions and concerns that were expressed by the attendees. These included what if any changes the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) may be considering as they delve into the use of blizzard bags this year (at this point it is the decision of each district's school committee as to whether the alternative assignments are rigorous enough to count for a day of school). I believe part of this issue revolves around how students on learning plans (504 and IEP) are getting appropriate services as outlined in their individual plans. It appeared that every school represented on the panel has addressed this issue in a positive manner although not necessarily in an identical fashion. It was also interesting that each school system provided the opportunity to customize assignments based upon student needs. The idea of children having a snow day to enjoy the day off was also brought up and it appeared that Gateway's five school day assignment window was the best way to ensure that work for that day could be done over a weekend if students didn't want to do the assignment on the actual day of cancelled classes.

Unlike Gateway, the other schools seemed to have a more proscribed idea of what blizzard bag assignments should look like with the commonality being some sort of project based assignment (we allow each teacher, grade level or team to develop assignments based upon their needs so some may be project based while others may be based upon assignments related to what that staff member is doing at the time of the blizzard bag day). This led some districts to approve their blizzard bag assignments at the same time while others reviewed

assignments throughout the year. The common area was some sort of review to ensure that assignments were rigorous enough to meet DESE's standards.

It appeared that there was a general agreement that nothing can replace the interactions between a teacher and their students in the classroom but that the effort in maintaining student engagement in late June, in hot classrooms, and well past the planned last day of the school year was very difficult to maintain and therefore a well constructed blizzard bag process was an excellent alternative. It will be interesting to see if blizzard bags continue to be supported by the DESE and whether other districts will implement the idea in the future.

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