

GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Superintendent's Corner

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With ski areas already opening in Vermont it won't be long before we begin experiencing more winter-like conditions in the hilltowns. Given the differing long-term forecasts for this winter, ranging from warmer with more precipitation to colder with more precipitation, and with even short-term forecasts often being not entirely correct, we're faced with the reality of not really knowing what's going to happen weather wise on a day to day basis. Given these realities it's time to review the district's protocols regarding weather delays, early releases and weather related closings. For the third year we will be using 'Blizzard Bags' to minimize the number of days we need to make up in June.

We are all aware that the topography within and between our towns varies greatly. Given this, it's not unusual for just one town to have rain at lower elevations and snow at another elevation. Spread over our six towns, these differences can be even greater to the point that in a given storm we could have conditions that range from just rain, through freezing rain to snow, meaning that in some areas we could run buses while in others this would be very difficult. Whether we change the school schedule for weather really rests on any location where there would be an increased danger in operating our buses. One also has to remember that we run a number of different sized buses on roads that range from dirt to paved and from relatively flat and straight to very hilly with sharp curves. While we as individuals in our four-wheel drive vehicles may think the roads aren't bad, it's a different story when driving a large bus with only rear wheel drive over the same roads.

The bottom line is the safety of getting our children to school based upon information about our local conditions as provided by our local road crews. For that reason, we may be the only school district that has a delay or is closed and that is not any indication that any other district has made a less than perfect decision because we don't know all of the factors that were considered.

In Gateway's case, those factors are the number and length of our bus runs that, combined with our school start times, means decisions on delaying the opening of school, or canceling school, must be made no later than 5 a.m. in order to notify the bus company, staff and parents in a timely fashion. The other factor, especially in delays, is that even when precipitation has ended we still have to provide time for crews to clean up the roads and our own staff to finish plowing and sanding parking lots and walkways.

As one may imagine it's fairly easy to make calls when the forecasts are on target, the snow is already falling, and there is general agreement that the snow will last for a long period of time. The more difficult decisions are when the forecast is calling for inclement weather during the day but it hasn't started early in the morning. Trying to predict when it will start, how quickly the road conditions will deteriorate, and how the timing may impact decisions around serving lunch and calling early dismissals if needed. Early dismissals are always interesting because the timing of both the weather and the buses must be taken into consideration. Given that we usually have an hour between dismissal times, the middle/high school has to be let out in time to get the elementary run done and buses off the roads before they become dangerous. If we let out too late at the middle/high level (after snow has already begun for example) then the buses may not make it back in an hour and therefore delay even further the buses dropping off students at their homes. So, much like the early morning decisions, early dismissal decisions need to be made well before the actual dismissal time to allow for parents to

be notified, bus drivers to be brought in and buses to make it to school. Couple this with whether lunch will be served and how class schedules will be impacted really means that the decision to dismiss early is often made in the first hour or two of school and based upon the latest weather predictions (just think how easy this would be if our crystal ball for weather was never wrong!).

If you consider the accuracy of weather forecasts, the variability in how that storm will impact different areas of the region, the impact on families and their work schedules and how some will consider the final decision to be faulty no matter what it is, it's easy to see how this is one of the most stressful decisions to be made. In most discussions with other superintendents they often comment that these are often the most controversial decisions they have to make on a regular basis despite doing their best to consider the safety of their students as the driving force behind such decisions.

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