

# **Making Snow Days Count - Alternative Learning Days/Blizzard Bags for Gateway RSD**

## **Defining Blizzard Bags**

“Blizzard Bags” refers to a practice of assigning work to students to make up days in which school is cancelled for reasons such as inclement weather. This has been implemented in several states (Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Ohio) and under different operational models. As a K-12 system divided into elementary, middle, and high schools, we are looking to create a model that is flexible within the district, within schools, and even within grades as long as the instructional activities meet the DESE definition of structured learning time. Depending on the model chosen by individual staff members or groups, due dates for assignment completion, assessment of assignments, and a determination of credit may vary.

Our anticipation is that these learning activities will not only meet the ‘structured learning time’ test but will also be educationally relevant and at least as engaging as additional school days tacked onto the calendar in mid to late June. We are also exploring ways to leverage the technology that both the schools and our communities provide to extend learning while being cognizant of the lack of broadband in many areas within our district, meaning that teachers will have to plan for both online and paper/pencil assignments for alternative learning days.

## **Rationale:**

Over the last twelve years, the Gateway Regional School District has averaged 5.4 cancellations per year with the majority of these due to inclement weather. In one instance we lost the majority of school days in December due to an ice storm and the related damage to utilities and blocked roads. While the state mandates that students attend school for 180 days and 990 hours (high school) or 900 hours (elementary schools), the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has allowed “Blizzard Bag” exceptions to the 180 day rule based upon the substitution of high quality work accomplished during cancellations. The experience of students, parents, and staff members is that making instruction relevant, engaging students, and maintaining high levels of attendance on ‘make-up’ days due to earlier school cancellations is difficult at best. During an all staff meeting it was also pointed out that there are several additional reasons for the district to consider alternatives to making up weather cancellations in June. These included:

- A better flow of instruction focused on curriculum when students continue to be engaged in the subject on a timely basis (i.e., fewer interruptions of the lesson material due to missing one or more days in a week due to school cancellations);
- The curriculum is more likely to be covered prior to state standardized testing
- For students in AP courses, coverage of material is more likely to occur before the mandated testing dates;
- Students will get the opportunity to implement time management skills and the ability to become more familiar with self-directed academic pursuits that are becoming such an integral part of both the workplace and college experience;

- For elementary students this is an opportunity to provide parents with additional 1to1 time, to see what their children are learning in school, and to share their own experiences around those topics;
- Provides a learning opportunity to experience independent, hands-on, experiential learning and sets the stage for lifelong learning;
- Provides the opportunity to further extend and blend learning beyond the walls of the GRSD.

It's also important to note that at the high school level, our seniors graduate, as allowed by the DESE, well before the end of the 180 days; therefore any school cancellations shorten the school year for them even more, which impacts the instruction that occurs during the year for seniors. This difference in the last day of school for seniors in mixed grade classes also creates problems with the complete and effective coverage of materials for students in these classes.

### **Goal:**

To implement an alternative instruction process that is flexible yet meets or exceeds the DESE standard for structured learning time so that school days missed for inclement weather or other issues can be counted towards the required instructional time for the calendar year.

This requires several objectives and an understanding that this may look different at the elementary, MS, and HS levels.

1. 'Blizzard Bags' in the GRSD are defined as:
  1. A series of one time assignments to be completed and returned within five school days of the cancellation that are tied into what is taught at that time, or,
  2. A series of linked assignments to be updated and reviewed immediately after a weather-related cancellation but part of an ongoing, longer term project that will need to be completed by May 15
2. Assess progress and completion of the assignment(s):
  1. Students who fail to complete the work assigned for an alternative learning day based upon current lessons will be:
    1. Marked absent for that day (counted towards their overall attendance)
    2. Receive a zero for that assignment (incorporated into their overall grade)
  2. Linked assignments or project based assignments may:
    1. Be assigned by an individual teacher, grade level team, or department
    2. Each part of the assignment will be graded for each day and factored into the attendance and grades for the semester in which the alternative learning day is assigned
3. Address concerns related to implementation:
  1. Community perceptions related to paying staff who are not in school
    1. The community will be informed that staff are still required to prepare the lessons, review and assess the completed material, and provide support for those lessons between the assignment and completion dates
    2. The community will be reminded that staff have professional development requirements that are met during the work day (such as early releases for

which students have shortened days) and that we will expand that time for categories of staff for alternative learning days

2. Student needs related to established school supports:
  1. Students with additional support needs (ELL, 504, IEP) will have their assignments modified based upon their needs.
  2. This may also include providing additional time and resources for these students upon their return to the normal school days.
3. Equity within professional staff (i.e., classroom teachers vs. guidance/adjustment counselors, nurses, and specialized support staff (PT/OT))
  1. The principals have developed some potential items for professional staff that are not teaching. These include doing some of the preparation work for transitioning students between grades, updating computerized databases, reviewing files, and other professional activities
  2. We will provide additional time during regular school days for select professional staff to 'make up' time for specific tasks that are difficult to complete when students are in the buildings including Professional Development
4. Equity between professional and paraprofessional staff
  1. We will develop items for the paraprofessionals and non-certified staff to complete such as operational protocols for different positions and/or,
  2. We will provide additional time during regular school days for non-professional staff to 'make up' time for specific tasks that are difficult to complete when students are in the buildings
4. Develop a means of measuring the success of implementing "Blizzard Bags"
  1. Students - work done, numbers completing work, differences between student groups and grade levels, changes in attendance percentages, proficiency in mastering curricula standards, and any changes in state standardized testing results
  2. Professional staff - difficulty of implementing, success in meeting 'Structured Learning Time' definition, amount of work, impact on instruction and curriculum, suggested changes for the future
  3. Paraprofessional staff - Tasks accomplished, degree of difficulty and time involved, ideas for the future
  4. Families - difficulty of implementation, suggestions for improvements
  5. District - changes in state mandated student assessments, determination of actual cost savings due to implementing the program
5. Modify program based upon input from students, staff and families specifically looking at:
  1. How each type of work was successful (one time curriculum work vs. long term projects)
  2. If this program should be limited in the number of days of school cancellations
  3. To address any specific concerns from any group
  4. To share collected data with school committee, public, and DESE
  5. To help determine if the number of 'Blizzard Bag' days should be limited and when they should start

1. For this year we're anticipating starting the 'Blizzard Bag' model on the first day school is cancelled and would seek up to 5 days of having Blizzard Bags count towards the required 180 days of instruction.