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## Why and when weather forces FL schools to close

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Linda Madsen Guest Columnist

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Even the Minnesota Vikings have had more than their share of weather-related issues, with two games being postponed and relocated after the collapse of the Metrodome roof, all due to snowfall.

Yet somehow our school district has, for the most part, been spared. We've had two days in which afternoon and evening activities were cancelled. But all things considered, that is a minor matter compared to the difficulties other areas of Minnesota have faced.

I thought this might be an interesting topic to explore in this week's column, given that most people in the community probably don't know the process we

use to determine whether or not we will be closing school due to a weather emergency.

Though there are many factors involved with calling a "snow day," keeping students and employees safe is the most important goal.

If we receive reports that any weather-related issue might be imminent, staff from our district's transportation department will monitor broadcasts from the National Weather Service to get current information and details on the weather situation. If, on the night before a school day, it appears the following morning's weather conditions could cause unsafe roads, Supervisor of Transportation John Gray will notify me of this and we will begin preparation for dealing with this potential issue.

At approximately 3:15 a.m. the following morning, Gray and Jim Beck, the transportation department's shop foreman, will talk on the phone to determine if the current weather conditions require evaluating the safety of the roads.

As many of you may know, our district is geographically the largest school district in the metro area, covering approximately 240 square miles. This requires a pretty early start in the morning to determine the road conditions.

So, John and Jim will leave their homes and begin evaluating road conditions at about 3:30 a.m. The size of our school district presents unique challenges because snow fall amounts and icy conditions can vary from one side of the district to the other.

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Individual towns and cities also have differing plowing policies and procedures, which can also complicate matters.

John and Jim will continue to drive the roads and discuss the road conditions by phone. Then they will meet at the transportation department facility at around 4:30 a.m. to discuss the conditions they found driving around the district so they can advise the superintendent (me) on whether or not they think we should modify our school schedule in some way that day, whether it be a late start or a complete cancellation of school for that day.

Sometimes the decision to close school is straightforward and relatively easy. Often, however, there are many things to consider.

Some of the primary factors we use to make that assessment include: the temperature outside; whether students can wait at the bus stop safely; how much snow is on the road; whether the roads are visibly icy and dangerous; whether there is black ice on the road; whether there are plow trucks out in each community and if they have begun salting and sanding the roads; the condition of the freeways, highways and main roads; whether the dead-end roads been plowed and if a bus can perform a turnaround without getting stuck.

Once all factors have been considered, John Gray will call surrounding school districts to determine their status. John will call me to report on whether the buses can run safely and to make a recommendation on the best course of action.

If the weather emergency occurs in the early morning, our options obviously include starting school an hour or two late, canceling classes entirely or moving forward with school as usual. If the weather emergency occurs once school has started, our options include shortening the school day and sending

students home early or continuing with classes as normal.

If possible, we try to avoid sending students home early, because many families do not have someone at home to supervise children returning home from school early.

We also make determinations as to whether morning, afternoon or evening activities would continue, or be cancelled or postponed, depending on the situation. This is done in consultation with the high school's Activities Director Joel Olson and Community Education Director Julie Ohman.

When students are waiting for the school bus to arrive on cold mornings, we ask that they remain at the bus stop rather than waiting inside their homes. The reason we do this is so that we can avoid long delays and ensure that the students can be picked up promptly. Most of our bus routes have a minimum of 20 stops. Even a 30-second delay at a school bus stop can add up quickly if it happens at stop after stop.

This means that students at the end of the route, many of whom may not be at a bus stop close to their house, end up waiting out in the cold even longer.

In addition, students who are waiting in their homes will often be rushed in running to catch the bus. This can be very dangerous, especially considering the potential that they may be running on slippery sidewalks, driveways or roads. So we ask that parents please dress their child for the weather and have them at the bus stop five minutes prior to bus arrival.

We appreciate the cooperation that parents in this district have given us as we deal with these types of weather emergencies. Again, our first priority is making sure that our students are able to come to school safely. Fortunately, this year we have not

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had to postpone or cancel school. Hopefully this will continue for the rest of the year.

Writer Linda Madsen is superintendent of schools in Forest Lake.



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