

School districts test the roads before calling it a snow day

When the weather gets rough and the roads turn icy, it may become a hazardous endeavor for students trying to get to school.

A snow day may be called by the school district, a decision that is based on several factors.

The school district's superintendent usually has the final say in choosing to close schools because of weather conditions, but they are also advised by other departments.

Some school districts send employees outside to determine the severity of snowfall on the roads.

For example, the Waterford School District's transportation supervisor and the assistant superintendent of business services both drive the roads in the early morning hours to determine if roads, particularly neighborhood roads, are accessible.

The Troy School District's director of operations will also tour the district and determine if conditions will be safe for the students, staff, and the community.

Rochester Community Schools Superintendent David Pruneau relies on the district's transportation department, which includes bus drivers, when making a school closure decision.

"I don't drive a bus. They do, and I need to hear an honest appraisal from them," says Pruneau. "It comes down to the safety of students."

Oakland County school districts use a variety of available resources in determining school closings.

A few districts, such as the Holly Area School District, contact the Oakland County Road Commission to determine closures.

Rochester Community Schools monitor national service weather updates. The Troy School District consults a number of sources, including local weather reports.

"All 28 districts in Oakland County have the opportunity to get information via conference call from one meteorologist, but we also draw from a variety of available weather report sources," says Bloomfield Hills School Superintendent Robert Glass.

It is not always snow that forces a school to close.

Uncommonly cold weather can become a separate concern. For example, Huron Valley Schools will close schools if the wind chill reaches below 25 degrees.

Once the decision is made to close schools, notifications are sent out through various media.

"We notify every local television and radio station group, three major newspapers, as well as send out 'e-blasts' to every parent in the district," says Superintendent Barbara Fowler of the Troy School District.

The Troy district also posts information on the district's Facebook page and broadcasts the closure on the district's TV channel.

“Some of our schools have phone trees where parents call one another,” says Fowler.

Sometimes a school’s closing will generate complaints from concerned parents.

“We receive complaints from both sides -- parents saying we should close and others saying we shouldn’t,” says Janet Roberts, Huron Valley Schools Director of Community Relations.

“Our preference is to have children in school as many days as possible.”

The State of Michigan currently allows up to 30 hours, or five school days, for weather closings, about 3 percent of the number of days in a school year.

Most Oakland County schools have used one or two school days this year.