

## ***The evolution of snow days***

--*"Nothing burns like the cold."* Novelist George R. R. Martin

Like most adults, I have fond memories of sitting by the radio with bated anticipation waiting for my school to be named in the list of cancellations. The squeals of joy my brother and I had and the lightning quick jump into our snow gear and grabbing our sleds are cherished memories. As a teenager, this simply transformed into a relaxed settling into bed for the rest of the morning (after the same squeals of joy). I certainly never imagined that many years later hundreds of children would know me as "the lady who calls snow days."

I wish the snow forecasts brought me that same gleeful anticipation now! Unfortunately, I have learned far too much about the processes and procedures of such an endeavor...as well as the peril of getting it "wrong." At the risk of taking some of the "magic" out of the process, I thought I'd share exactly what goes into determining that EPS will have a weather cancellation as well as answer some of the most common questions we receive about them.

### ***What goes into making the decision?***

Surprisingly, there are many people and variables involved in this process. These include:

- The weather forecast. While we have the advantage of reports from the National Weather Service as well as a local meteorologist, these are obviously not always accurate.
- Road conditions. The DPW works at all hours and we receive regular updates of the road and sidewalk conditions around the Town.
- School parking lots and sidewalks. Custodians cannot clear and treat the sidewalks around the school buildings until the parking lots have been cleared. Obviously, parking lots are not cleared until roadways are finished.
- Buses and bus routes. All buses must be cleaned off and operating properly with heat. Also, sometimes roads that have been cleared to the point that cars can travel freely are still not safe enough for our large buses.
- Ice and wind. Even if roadways and schools are cleared, some or all schools may not have power. Significant outages or downed trees and power lines in Town also create hardships for families in getting to schools or waiting at bus stops in a safe manner.
- Emergency shelter. Richardson Olmsted is an emergency shelter for the Town. If it is ever being used by residents, we cannot have children in the school.
- Child care. A consideration is always whether children will safely be supervised. We are concerned about children who may be left home alone for the day if schools are closed, especially if parents have already left for work or have no alternative child care options. Conversely, depending on the road conditions, if teachers and staff cannot safely get across or into Town, we will not have appropriate supervision if schools are open.
- Building conditions. If there are any burst pipes, heating issues, or other weather-related facility problems, they must be addressed.

- Area districts. We communicate regularly with area Superintendents and know what they plan on doing before they make their public announcements. However, sometimes there are unique conditions in one of their schools or their district that have no effect on Easton (ie: any of the above). In addition, the accumulation of snow, wind gusts, etc. can vary even from one town to its most immediate neighbor.
- The number of Twitter pleas I receive from students (just kidding about this one!)

Unfortunately, it is not an easy or perfect process. Please be assured, however, that we do our very best in exercising best judgement with the information we have.

***Why don't you use delays and releases more often? Doesn't it count as a school day?***

One of the major considerations is child supervision. Perhaps even more so than with a school closing, it is impossible to insure that all children will be appropriately supervised if we delay the start or send them home unexpectedly. Because there are many children who would go home to empty houses, this is always a last resort. In addition, we must notify our child care partners to be sure they are prepared to handle a large number of children at an unexpected time of day.

Another consideration is the transportation. We need to make sure ALL three runs can be completed in a safe window of time (elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools). Just like snow cancellations, we can't delay or dismiss one or two schools. Barring a major emergency, it must be all or nothing. There are often great delays in transportation in poor weather. If a bus is 15 minutes late, it starts the next school's run 15 minutes late. If it then takes that route 15 minutes longer, it can cause the final route (elementary) to be 30 minutes or more behind.

Finally, while a half day in school is considered a "day," it is not our only requirement. We must also have the required **hours**. For Massachusetts, this is 900 hours per year for elementary and 990 for secondary. If we dismiss school three hours early, we have to subtract three hours from our total structured time. If we were to get to the end of a school year and have less than the required number of hours, we would have to add time/days to the school year. This would, for many reasons, be prohibitive.

***The delays are confusing, can you repeat what they are?***

We only exercise two types of delays and only when absolutely necessary. We have a one hour delay and a two hour delay. These are literal time differences. So, if your child's bus pick up time is usually 7:45, it would be 8:45 in a one hour delay and 9:45 in a two hour delay. If they normally begin school at 9:10, a one hour delay would be 10:10 and a two hour delay would be 11:10. This is the same for dismissal times. The only time this might be confusing is for Pre-K and kindergarten half-day programs. We usually cancel those completely if there will be a two hour delay, but this is typically included in the messages we send to all families.

***Why do you cancel after school activities on snow days?***

Many of the considerations above for cancelling school are also considered for activities. It is also similar in that it is best to cancel all or none. Since many activities involve bus or car travel

to and from distant cities and towns, even if Easton is considered “cleared,” those communities may still be risky. It is our policy to cancel all afternoon and evening programs when school is cancelled.

***Can you make the decision the night before instead of in the morning?***

This would be the best possible scenario for everyone. However, the least definitive information we have in the decision making process is the weather forecast. It is often necessary to see what the morning weather is and whether the overnight accumulation has been cleared. As you know, there is often a big difference between what is predicted at 8:00pm and what actually happens or how that prediction changes by 5:00am. Once the decision is made, it cannot be recalled. It is always our intention to make the decision as early as possible for appropriate child care and transportation planning purposes. We will always do this the night before when possible.

***What if I do not feel it is safe for my child to go to school or participate in an activity and it has not been cancelled?***

Every area of town, every family situation, and every child is different. If you as a parent ever feel that your child should stay home for safety reasons, you should keep them home. Only you will know their specific circumstances. Simply follow the same requested procedure your school has for reporting student absences.

***What is the best way for me to know about delays or cancellations?***

We notify parents and the public in various ways, please choose what works best for you:

- Twitter: @SupEaston or @AssistSupEaston
- District website under “Trending Now”: [www.easton.k12.ma.us](http://www.easton.k12.ma.us)
- School Messenger (This will be sent to all contact phone numbers and emails. Please make sure yours is up-to-date)
- Local news outlets: WBZ, WCVB, WHDH, WFXT, NECN

Clearly, my perception of snow days has evolved over the last few decades. While I never choose to wish time away, I can’t help but look forward to the thrill of snow days once again in my retirement (as I watch them on the news from somewhere that doesn’t get snow).

Please stay safe and warm this season.

Dr. Lisha Cabral