

What does the Superintendent do?

One of my biggest fears as a new Superintendent was making the first weather cancellation decision and failing miserably. Whatever decision I made, I pictured phone calls of “Are you crazy? Have you been out on those roads?...or...Why did you call off school? There is hardly a flake on the ground and it’s sunny out.” As with many decisions, it often gets down to predicting what will happen when no one really knows. Highly trained meteorologists with cutting edge technology end up being wrong from time to time. What chance do I have?

When I was a High School Principal, almost as soon as the first snowflakes hit the ground, the students used to come to me and ask when I was going to call off school. I would tell them that it wasn’t my decision. They would inevitably ask whose it was and when I would tell them that it was the Superintendent’s decision, they would respond with “What does he know?” It got me wondering about how students perceive the role of the Superintendent. I had one of my spies ask a few random students two questions. First: What is a Superintendent? Second: What do they do all day? I got some really great answers. Ryan, a 7th grader, stated that the Superintendent was a “guy that runs the whole school district” and “closes our schools.” Mitch, a 6th grader believes that he is a “guy in charge of principals” who does important stuff like decide on if foods change at lunch and if we get new computers and stuff.” According to Liam, a 5th grader, he is the “head of the school district” who does “stuff like pay the bills and check weather to do school cancellations.” Abbie, a 4th grader, was a little more gender neutral stating that the “Superintendent is somebody who helps around a lot and helps in the office. They tell people to come to the office, take notes, and take lunch money.” My personal favorite was one of our eighth grade girls who said “She (thanks for that) probably does a lot of paperwork and watches out for our schools to make sure nothing is happening.”

Although I do hope that “learning” is “happening,” it is true that I check the weather and do a lot of paperwork. Although I do not pay the bills and take lunch money, I am responsible for making sure our budget is administered in the best interest of our students. The truth is that I do very little directly to impact the day to day lives of our students other than to make that important school cancellation decision. At the same time, the decisions that I do make have a profound effect on the overall operation of the district and thus, on the overall education of our community youth.

Many of these decisions are guesswork, prediction, and vision. For example, we are presently in the process of writing a handbook for our employees that will cover everything from benefits, to compensation, to working conditions, to expectations for performance. All at a time when we don’t know for sure how many students we will have, how many employees we will need, what state level decisions have yet to be made that will impact how we operate, and what is the best way to provide an outstanding education for our students in the 2012-13 school year with the resources we think we will have but are not sure of. That is a lot of important decision-making without some key pieces of information. How do I do that? I talk with administrators in the district, other staff members, community members, board members, and administrators from other districts. I research what the present laws are, what new laws are likely to pass, what common thought among the “experts” is, and what the budget forecasters have to say. I play through scenarios to see what we need to do to be

prepared for various outcomes that we may not be able to control. I rely on past experience with an eye to the future and once and a while, I have to just guess. That is what those of us that lead need to do in times that are unpredictable. Many of these decisions are ultimately made by the school board, but I won't duck responsibility in that clearly, my advice and the information that I provide has a major impact on what decisions are made. As I said earlier this year, making these types of decisions require the trust of community members, employees, board members, and students, and I promise you, just as with the snow cancellations, I take that trust and the responsibility that comes with it, to heart.

For students who have hung in there through this article, I will share my secret formula for weather cancellations.

$$\frac{2.97 (b (d+c) +M)}{3(h)w - nf} > \frac{6.42 (r - p)}{j + o}$$

F is for the forecast , b is the school bus tire tread depth, s is the inches of snow, d is the drift height, w is for the wind speed, c is the percentage of child wonder I have in me that loves an unexpected snow day, m is for the mom paranoia in me that wants to make sure our students are safe, h is for how hungry I am for the cookies that the neighbor boy promised his mom would bake for me if I called off school, and n is for the number of neighboring school districts that have already made the decision to cancel. On the other side of the equation is r for the responsibility of making sure our students have access to every minute of education they are entitled to, p is for the parents that now need to scramble to make sure their children have safe supervision if they are scheduled to work, j is for the days in June students might need to make up and will really hate even though right now they will say they won't, and o is for the oversight the state has in making sure we meet our day and hours of instruction requirement. If the left side is greater than the right side, I call off school...simple as that.