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The story can also be found here with a different lede: <http://www.chicago-bureau.org/cancel-not-cancel-odd-formula-shuttering-schools-frozen-temps/>

To Cancel, or Not to Cancel?

On January 7, Chicago Public Schools, Evanston/Skokie School District 65, and many others cancelled school due to “cold weather.” Seems kind of silly, but that was the final call the superintendent of most of the area school districts made.

There are many factors that go into the decision of whether or not to cancel school, including the predicted temperature and wind chill, transportation, and safety.

“First and foremost, we have to consider the safety of our kids. Can the kids get to school on time, can they get there safely, what happens if the buses are late, what happens if we can’t open up the building? So we’ve got a bunch of variables,” said Dr. Paul Goren, the Superintendent of District 65.

Besides these standard factors, there is another that needs to be taken into consideration that does not usually come to mind.

The other districts in the area have a big impact on whether or not a district closes since “many of our teachers are parents who have kids in the public school systems in and around Evanston, so when the other systems close, then the teachers have to do what they have to do to cover their kids... and so then we have to worry about whether we have staff on hand to cover the class,” said Goren.

In addition, the superintendents do not make this call on their own. Goren said that he has a senior management team that helps him make the decision that includes the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, the Superintendent of Special Services, the

Assistant Superintendent for Business Services, the Director for Buildings and Grounds and the Director of Maintenance.

In the Chicago area, this cold winter weather was no laughing matter. While the temperature was usually above zero the week schools closed, the wind chill took it down as low as -30 degrees – although the wind chill was not sustained. While many school districts chose to close Jan. 8 due to the extreme cold as well, Dr. Eric Witherspoon, the Superintendent of Evanston Township High School (ETHS), made a different call.

“After the first day of closure we took a look and said, ‘there’s no reason we need to be closed.’ The streets are wide open, we don’t have a snow problem at all; yes, there are extreme cold weather predictions, but the fact is it’s no colder than it is on lots of winter days in Evanston,” said Witherspoon.

“So frankly, my decision wasn’t just that we should open the next day, but I actually looked at it and said we shouldn’t have closed the day we did,” he added.

Witherspoon also noted that ETHS has a reputation for rarely closing when other districts do, and part of that may be due to how its students get to school. Unlike other districts, ETHS doesn’t have school buses because it is a city district; rather, its students use the CTA buses for their commute. So part of the decision to not close school comes from that fact that CTA almost never stops running and usually maintains a very accurate schedule, making it easy for students to catch a bus.

While countless students were surely thrilled about school being closed for a day or two, their parents and guardians were decidedly much less excited. One Chicago father, William Choslovsky, wrote into the *Chicago Tribune* with his thoughts on the

matter, claiming that closing the schools for cold was leading to further “wussification” of our society.

“Our kids can go to school. Considering that so few even walk anymore, what difference does the temperature make? That Jenny and Johnnie may actually stand at the bus stop shivering for all of 10 minutes? Who cares? Frankly, it's good for the pups,” wrote Choslovsky. “Just what lesson are we teaching our kids by closing schools? And please, spare me the word ‘safety.’ It is a complete crutch.”

Sacha Patera, a Skokie resident and mother of two, is on the same page with Choslovsky.

“I don’t relish the idea of kids standing around waiting for buses to be picked up or figuring out how to get to school when its very cold; at the same time, we’ve become a bit of a weenie society. I mean, this notion that all the kids are driven to school even if they’re really close, they cant walk anymore, they don’t know how to take public transport to get to school – to me that’s all weird,” said Patera.

In addition, when school is cancelled, it’s not just a fun day for the kids to stay home and watch TV – parents often have to scramble the night or just a few hours before work to figure out if someone can watch their kids or if they have to take a day off.

“[When my kids were little] it was a huge stress. It was extremely disruptive because I don’t have someone I can call at the last minute to take care of my children. It meant that it would be a day I would have to take off. I’m very lucky that I have a job where I can do that fairly easily without dramatic repercussions. It’s more inconvenient but there’s still a commitment that you’ve made to people that you have to break,” said Patera.

The factors and risks involved for each district differ, so sometimes different calls have to be made – even for neighboring communities. But with each winter, new lessons are learned.

“One of the lessons learned is we need to be very systematic about our decision making – we have to take in all the data, we have to trust what the weather service is providing us, and we have to do our best to communicate with the parents in a timely manner so they can make the arrangements they need to make for their kids the next day,” said Goren.