

As I was deciding whether to close school Jan. 16, I knew one thing for sure. No matter what the decision was, some people wouldn't be happy about it. And that was the case. I received communications praising the decision to close and others criticizing it.

I'd like to explain how we arrived at the decision to close our schools because of extreme cold. I say "we" because I work with a team of administrators who have different responsibilities as we consider all the factors involved. But the final decision is mine, and I'll take the heat for it.

The major concern is for the children's safety and well-being. The forecast called for temperatures of five degrees below zero during our morning bus runs, with wind chills of 21 degrees below zero. At that temperature, frostbite can begin to occur at 30 minutes of exposure.

As long as everything went smoothly, children would not have been outside for that long. But things don't always go smoothly. Our diesel buses are plugged into heaters overnight, but they still can be difficult to start. The day before, when temperatures were ten degrees warmer, we had two that didn't start. In sub-zero temperatures, water main breaks are very common and can cause major traffic problems.

Many children at bus stops would have been waiting in their parents' cars, so the loading at each stop is slower and buses can start falling behind schedule. I could easily foresee circumstances coming together that would leave children out on the sidewalk in bitterly cold temperatures waiting for a school bus that was running late.

We were also concerned about conditions in some of our buildings. We have many children in portable units – trailers – that are difficult to heat properly in extreme temperatures. The day before we had water pipes frozen in one portable unit. Our buildings and grounds supervisor told me he did not know if the heating systems at Central Elementary and the Freshman School could hold up under the stress of non-stop operation.

In any weather, there are circumstances – a water main break, a power outage – that can cause us to send students home early from school. But we would not send students home early in extreme temperatures. Even though our Rapid Notification System lets us call every parent quickly, the reality is that some very small children would end up standing outside their houses, locked out, in bitter cold.

At 10 a.m. that morning, the city had to shut off water to South Elementary because of a water main break in the neighborhood. We would have had more than 450 in the building, with no safe way to send them home for another five hours, and no toilets that could flush.

I do understand the concerns expressed by parents and others who disagreed with the decision. I know most other districts did not close. But I made the decision to close for

the safety and well-being of the 10,000 students who are entrusted to our care every day.  
I believe it was the right thing to do.

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