

# What goes into a snow day

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By Thomas Franz✉



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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — It's that time of year again.

Although a weekend warmup has melted much of the snowpack throughout the metro Detroit area, snow-day season — and all of its uncertainties — is well underway.

Chippewa Valley Schools has had to call off school twice this winter, while other districts in northern parts of Macomb and Oakland counties have seen as many as five snow days.

The decision to declare a snow day involves several factors, and is different with each approaching storm, explained Ron Roberts, the superintendent of Chippewa Valley Schools.

“Every snow day, weather is a little different. Timing is everything. We've had a couple events recently where timing wasn't in our favor,” Roberts said.

One of the instances occurred the morning of Jan. 17, when a batch of freezing rain that began falling the evening before was forecast to melt by the time kids would be heading off to school. Temperatures, however, remained just cold enough to maintain icy conditions, and created a situation for Roberts to call for an unexpected snow day at 6:15 a.m., much later than he would have liked.

“With the ice day, I had started (following the weather updates) the afternoon before. When the forecast isn't as solid, that's when it causes some problems,” Roberts said. “What compounded that storm was that I think the county expected it to be rain, and so I don't think streets were salted the way they normally are. I think this one caught them off guard.”

Roberts prefers to declare snow days the evening before if possible. That decision is based on current weather conditions, radar and consistency in weather forecasts for how much snow will fall overnight.

For times with uncertain forecasts or when snow won't start until the overnight hours, Roberts begins his process of declaring a snow day with a call to the district's transportation director, who is in frequent contact with other transportation officials countywide.

The feedback Roberts receives from transportation officials is a key determining factor in whether school will be held. After he makes his decision to call off school, he also reaches out to other districts to let them know of Chippewa's call.

“When they have a storm coming through that’s a mix of rain, snow and ice, you really want to be careful. Our goal is to get kids in school, and I don’t think it looks good for schools when it’s 8 a.m. and the roads are clear and the kids feel comfortable going to the mall,” Roberts said. “Sometimes the weather is a little less predictable and you don’t know what’s going to happen, and then some are so obvious.”

While student safety is paramount to the snow-day process, Roberts must also consider teacher safety and their ability to make it into work.

“This is a profession that you can only have a school day if your teachers can get there. You can’t have 500 kids show up with only 10 teachers, because where they come from might just be worse,” Roberts said. “That’s an added layer. In most businesses, it’s OK if someone does or doesn’t make it. We need people to be there with the kids. That’s the uniqueness of a snow day in schools.”

### **Social media outreach**

In the case of the Jan. 17 snow day, a day after the district had a day off for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Roberts, in addition to traditional announcement methods, used his Twitter account to announce the district would have a snow day.

That tweet took on a life of its own while collecting 650 retweets and 700 likes. District students replied to the announcement with a barrage of good-natured GIFs, memes and tweets praising Roberts’ decision to call off for snow.

Roberts said he has been using Twitter consistently for about a year and a half to disseminate announcements about school activities or to share information about various groups or teams in the district.

“The response from kids is overwhelming, and it’s overwhelmingly positive. It’s a good way for me to have a connection with kids,” Roberts said. “The things they tweet are all in good fun, so I enjoy that.”

Roberts said his use of the medium has helped him create a unique relationship with students when typically students would not be too familiar with a district superintendent.

“Kids really know me. I go places and kids come up to me and thank me for being there. I think that’s very important because I think it’s good kids recognize go to Chippewa Valley Schools and they know their superintendent,” Roberts said. “They think their superintendent will engage with them, and that’s a good thing.”



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Staff Writer Thomas Franz covers Macomb Township, Chippewa Valley Schools and the Macomb County Board of Commissioners for the Macomb Township Chronicle. He also covers sports primarily for the Shelby-Utica News. He has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2013 and attended Michigan State University.*

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