

**NOTE: With the introduction of e-Learning Days used in lieu of what would otherwise be Emergency (non-attendance) Days in the 2018-2019 school year, this open letter is a bit dated, but still offers some valuable insight into the decision behind 'closing' school due to extreme cold or heavy snowfall.**

---

### **The Decision to Call a "Cold Day" or a "Snow Day"**

An open letter to the Gower Community as inspired by an exchange of emails between Dr. Simon and one of our Gower Parents after reopening school (on Friday, January 9, 2015) following school closures due to "extreme weather conditions" on Jan. 7th and 8th, 2015.

**Please note that your child's safety is our top priority and is the most important factor in our decision-making process regarding emergency school closings. It is our practice to make the most informed decision when considering the use of an "emergency day" and it is our preference to notify parents no later than 6:00 a.m. on the morning of a school closure. We acknowledge the potential for inconveniences related to child care and individual work schedules that such a notification schedule may cause, but do want to ensure that we are making the most-informed decision in each case. If there is a forecast of severe weather for our area, we encourage parents to prepare for child care options ahead of time in the event that a school closure does occur. If the decision to "close school" is made the night before - based on the degree of certainty and severity of forecasts available - the preferred time for notification is closer to 6:00 p.m., but typically would not be made after 8:00 p.m. as we do understand the impact such a decision has on families. The information below helps explain some of the factors considered in calling what is commonly known as a "snow day".**

**- Victor Simon III, Superintendent of Schools**

---

*As a (parent) in the Gower school district, I am frankly confused over what variables drive the decision to close school due to inclement weather. While Wednesday of this week was undeniably a cold day, both my (spouse) and I were unclear why it warranted closing school... Can I ask what specific variables are taken into account when making a decision to close school? As it currently stands, the logic simply escapes me... (From email received Friday, Jan. 9, 2015, Gower Parent)*

---

Friday, January 9, 2015

Thank you for bringing up this important question,

First, I do apologize for any added stress/concern related to the decision to close school on Weds and Thurs. I do not make it a practice to call to state that school is open as I find it less confusing to announce exceptions only. Ideally, I try to have a robo-call/email sent close to 6:00 p.m. as it is my belief that the odds of having a parent receive that phone call are increased. A 7:30 p.m. call, as was placed on Weds, is a bit out of my preferred range, but in this case, I wanted to maintain some consistency with our immediate neighboring districts to limit unnecessary confusion for parents in the general area. Of course, if we find ourselves in a situation where a snowstorm may or may not "hit the immediate area", cancellations could occur as late as 6:00 a.m. on the morning of the school closure.

As far as variables and an objective formula considered in making the decision to close school: Each case presented is decided upon its own merit and essentially boils down to mitigating known risk that our children may face in the event that we are open for school. The existence of a single objective formula would certainly make things easier for everyone involved, but a single formula does not exist. Variables such as air temperature, wind gusts, wind-chill, and precipitation do come into play, as well as our ability to transport students safely (road conditions and mechanical reliability), ensure a safe environment (mechanical systems, food preparation, staffing), and our consideration of the high school district's status. It is our preference NOT to close if the high school is open given potential childcare concerns. The last factor listed is only a preference and certainly isn't a rule. There very well could be a scenario where the HS is in session and we are closed. Furthermore, just about all of these variables are being considered as forecasts and likely scenarios from predictive models. When there is a degree of certainty - such as the Wind-chill Warning issued on Weds and into Thursday - that helps in making a decision.

Regarding this week's decisions: Weds was closed as the temperatures predicted were consistently below -30 degrees with wind-chill and an official Wind-chill Warning (not an Advisory) was issued. We did run our buses through the night and were confident that our transportation and building systems were prepared, but it was simply too risky to chance having a student at one of our bus stops in that kind of weather should any of our buses experience a delay. This Warning was in effect during our drop-off period as well which ended up making Weds a relatively easy call.

Thursday was a much tougher call. My personal preference would have been to open session again considering the warming temps in the afternoon, but the combination of the Wind-chill Warning remaining through our a.m. bus routes and the predicted snowfall and windy conditions around dismissal outweighed that preference and led to a second close. There was considerable debate about this decision. Once it became more clear that the HS district would likely close, the decision for Gower to close became abundantly clear.

As far as today was concerned: As you know, the National Weather Service reduced the Wind-chill Warning to a Wind-chill Advisory. Don't get me wrong, both are exceptionally cold and even "severe" (defined at temperatures at or below -20), but there is a difference in terms of what is considered to be safe as far as possible time spent outdoors, etc. Nonetheless, we have multiple (warm) buses at each of our schools today ready in the event of an unexpected evacuation because of the weather conditions that you have detailed. We also knew that there was no precipitation in the forecast at arrival or dismissal - although there would be considerable winds - and that helped in making the

decision to reopen, along with another night of ensuring that our buses were ready to provide safe and reliable transport. Now, today we may know that the low temperatures rival those of Weds. and Thurs., but keep in mind we could have in no way been sure of that until after it happened, thus the point about no single objective formula existing for anyone to apply. As uncomfortable and frustrating as it can be, there is some subjectivity that impacts the final decision.

All of this being said, our annual calendar has five emergency days "built-in" prior to the start of the school year. This is not stated as an argument to use them without significant deliberation. It is an argument to consider if the benefit of remaining open and preventing the known inconveniences associated with closing school ever outweighs the risks our students might face during the dangerous weather conditions we occasionally deal with in the often times less-than-temperate climate we live in. To err on the side of caution is not just an old adage when these kinds of decisions are being made, and I do respect your point of view that we very well "could have" been open all of this week.

Please excuse the wordy email, but I do hope this helps clarify the decision a bit more. I know that taking the time to answer your question was most definitely helpful to me as most of my career was spent in the Chicago Public Schools where, until recently, we simply never closed school.

Enjoy your weekend and please extend my apologies to your (spouse) as well. I do know what the shuffling feels like as a parent when the schedule is changed.

Respectfully,

Dr. Victor Simon III  
Superintendent of Schools  
Gower School District 62

---

*Thank you Dr. Simon—your explanation was indeed very helpful. While ideally it would be beneficial to understand the overall criteria for school closings in concrete, quantitative terms, I can appreciate your points reflecting the many qualitative variables that do come into play. I realize that child safety is your utmost concern and it is clear from your response that much deliberation proceeds the decision to close. In fact, you might consider posting a version of your response to me on the Gower homepage, as no doubt other parents are likely to be equally clueless as me as to what this process involves. Thanks again for your thoughtful response. Have a great weekend, and stay warm! Let's hope the coldest days are behind us...*

*(From email received Friday, Jan. 9, 2015, Gower Parent)*

---