

How does the SAU make the decision to cancel school or issue a delayed start?

Determining school cancelations and late starts is taken very seriously by the administration of SAU 70 and the Dresden, Hanover and Norwich School Districts. Our students, employees and bus driver safety is of utmost concern. Because we are a collaboration of integrated school districts, we must be consistent in cancelations and late starts across all three. We currently contract with Student Transportation of Vermont/America (STV/A) to provide transportation services to our districts. They employ the drivers and own the buses, which carry our District's names on them. We run 20 routes across many different types of terrain and elevations. Many of our 450 District employees travel from towns near and far via highways and secondary roads.

In order to account for the different weather conditions depending upon location and keep everyone safe, we follow many steps before a decision is made to close school or start school late. Close attention is paid to the weather every evening during the winter months. As soon as the National Weather Service issues a storm advisory, we begin watching the national and local weather channels as well as Doppler radar via the Internet. Tracking active storms is done all night long in preparation for possible school closings.

We also base our decision on the following extremely important factors:

- Temperature, including wind chill factor
- Number of inches and timing of projected snowfall
- Freezing rain and/or icy conditions
- Wind velocity impacting the blowing and drifting of snow, along with visibility issues
- Buses running routes at a slower pace having an impact on the length of time students may be waiting at bus stops
- Parents driving their sons/daughters in poor driving conditions and high school age students with little experience driving

A decision to close schools or start late must be made by 5:45 am, as buses begin picking up students at 6:50 am. At about 5:15 am the Business Administrator contacts the district's police and highway departments as well as the transportation company to determine road conditions. Drivers who live in various district locations are polled about conditions of their roads as well. The Business Administrator, Transportation Manager of STV/A and Superintendent then consider all the information that has been gathered to make a decision.

Late starts are used when we are seeing the end of a storm and highway departments have advised that the extra time can aid in the clean up. It also provides better visibility for drivers during daylight. Late starts will normally be a two-hour delay from your normal school start. For example, if your child's school normally starts at 8:00 am, a late start causes the school day to begin at 10:00 am. When school is canceled or evening activities are canceled, it is important to contact your child's afterschool program providers to see if they too are closing early or canceling their programs. Our decisions do not necessarily affect programs run by the individual towns. Once a decision is made to close school or start late, a District "phone-tree" goes into effect, which notifies District parents, employees, radio and television stations.

Unless there are unusual circumstances, SAU 70 and its Districts will not implement early dismissals for bad weather situations. An early dismissal introduces the risk of sending a young student home to an empty house. We believe that knowing students are inside, safe, warm and learning is far better than sending them home to an empty house. However, it is important to remember that you are the parent and know what is best for your child. If you believe your child would be safer at home in poor weather conditions, your young learner's absence will be marked as excused. Likewise, if uncomfortable with the weather conditions throughout a poor-weather day as you assess the weather conditions, we would encourage you to act upon that belief, communicate with your school's principal, and make the necessary arrangements to pick up your child.

Overall, buses are very safe modes of transportation. Drivers can and do pull over to call for on the spot sand deliveries should conditions warrant. Please encourage your teenager to ride the bus during inclement weather rather than drive. They are safer having an experienced driver take them to school.

What may appear to be a simple decision, as you can tell, includes many components: transportation, communications, before/after school child care programs within and outside of our elementary schools, the timing of the decision, road crews, the transportation company and the bus drivers. The decisions to close school are based on the ability of the buses to safely and efficiently transport students and the ability of our employees and student drivers to arrive safely at school and home again. Ultimately, the decision lies with the superintendent and it is, indeed, a difficult one, but like you, our first priority is to ensure the safety of our students. Although some may choose to disagree, we will never compromise that basic principle when making the decision, and we support your decision in keeping children home if and when you find it necessary. It is often a judgment call and we strive to do the best we can for everyone involved.

In an effort to cut down on cancelations, we have reviewed all of our bus routes to determine which have proven especially difficult to navigate on poor-weather days. Approximately 20% of the terrain falls into this category. After speaking with our School Boards, we have been working with our transportation provider about the possibility of temporary suspension of certain route stops and using “weather-advisory stops” during days of severe weather conditions. The process is still being set up through our messenger system and we are working with drivers to determine alternative stops for those sections of our routes that are particularly challenging. When we are ready to implement the procedure, it will roll out as follows: If you live in a section of town or on a road that has historically proven difficult passage on weather-advisory days, we would notify you by 6:00 am that we cannot make it to your regular stop, but will pick your student(s) up at another agreed-upon location. Alternatively, you may choose to bring the student to school with your own vehicle, or choose to keep the student home. As soon as these roads and stops have been determined, you will be contacted directly by the Business Administrator’s office of the process.