

# ‘Snow right call: Why calling for a snow day is more stressful than you’d think

On cold wintry mornings, Superintendent Dori Leyko sets her alarm for 4:00 a.m. She’s out the door by 4:15, trailed by her car-ride-loving dog. For the next 30 minutes or so, she drives into town following a path that covers the main roads students and parents take to get to school in the morning. By the end, she sits in the high school parking lot, texting other administrators the answer to the most important question.

Will there be a snow day?

During our monthly brainstorming session, a Portrait staffer pitched the idea of writing an article about what makes a snow day. We had just gotten back from winter break, and while surrounding schools closed 2-4 days throughout that week, we didn’t close until Friday, when the winter storm predicted on the forecast started late in the afternoon.

I jumped at the chance to write the article for two reasons: one, because I wondered what led Leyko to call that Friday a snow day when the weather wouldn’t have impacted a half-day at the high school. But also, because I recalled a time when I was in sixth grade, and a polar vortex threatened to upend nearly an entire week of school. During that week, I saw a tweet from Leyko saying that she had the potential to be the most unpopular or most loved person in East Lansing.

Even though we ended up having school off most of that week, Leyko felt that she had to send students a message, worried she would face backlash for not calling a snow day if the weather was not as bad as forecasts predicted.

In sixth grade, I didn’t care. I wanted a snow day. But now, in retrospect, I feel bad for Leyko.

She had only been the Superintendent for around a year following the unexpected resignation of the previous Superintendent, and she had to make a decision that had the potential to make her very unpopular with students. I wanted to know how we as students could relieve some of the pressure on her. So on January 29, we sat down and discussed the decisions she has to make and how they affect her.

The first takeaway during that interview was that Leyko’s job revolves around making decisions; decisions that directly impact students, parents and educators in the district. Leyko puts a considerable amount of time and effort into making beneficial choices, but no matter what she does, there will always be someone who doesn’t support her decision.

“Some folks are going to agree with you and support you, and others won’t,” Leyko said, “It’s difficult making decisions that won’t probably have consensus from everyone.”

Snow days are no different. While calling a snow day seems like an easy decision, Leyko has to figure out whether to prioritize learning or safety based on weather patterns, which can be extremely unpredictable. Because of this, there is a lot of consideration and planning that has to go into calling a snow day.

First, there are the obvious conditions: heavy snow or slick ice that makes driving more difficult, or extreme temperatures that may harm students walking to school. Then, there are the more difficult details. Because calling a snow day means every school in the district gets off school,

Leyko has to consider harsh weather conditions that may occur later in the day, as the Elementary Schools start and end later than the high school. This is something that Leyko often gets criticized for, as high school students and parents may not see a reason for a snow day if a storm starts later in the afternoon.

“I know that there was a lot of perception we probably could have had school that day, especially because it was a final exam day for all of you,” Leyko said, “But we knew that if I had high school come to school, and everybody else stay home, students wouldn't like that nor would staff.”

In short, the process of calling a snow day is stressful and intricate. But as students, there are things that we can do to take the pressure off of Leyko.

“I think getting information out to students about the thought that goes into it is really helpful,” Leyko said. “It's not just this, like wake up in the morning, pull up my shades, and call the school.”

Furthermore, it is helpful for students to remember that even though an unexpected day off of school is nice, it could mean that we have to go to school longer in the summer, which Leyko wants to avoid.

Finally, let Leyko know you appreciate her decision. It's easy to find yourself caught up in the fear that you made the wrong choice, especially when that choice could lead to a loss of learning.

There is no science and no manual to tell a superintendent the perfect decision to make, so the next time you leave a tweet begging Leyko to cancel school, thank her the next day for everything she does, whether she calls a snow day or not.

“The feedback from kids always feels good.” Leyko said, “I know that you love to sleep in a day.”

