

CENTRAL DAUPHIN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dr. Carol Johnson
Superintendent

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Parents, Guardians, and Staff of the Central Dauphin School District:

I would like to take this opportunity to give you some information about our internal processes yesterday and on other days when inclement weather is predicted. I think it is important for you to know why we make the decisions we make and how much goes into making them both before and after we commit to a course of action.

Process for Delays and Cancellations

In the days leading up to yesterday's storm, we closely monitored weather reports and predictions from multiple sources as we always do. By Wednesday afternoon, the forecasts were beginning to align with one another. We received numerous reports that the timeframe of greatest concern would be late afternoon to early evening on Thursday. We also received information from the forecast centers that we could expect between one-half to two inches of snow and sleet by the end of the event. The data also indicated that by the end of the storm, we might get between 0.01 and 0.10 inches of ice. This was expected after 4 pm. This was the data upon which we based our decision.

When we are trying to determine a course of action before an inclement weather event, the superintendents of seven (7) different school districts from this area of Dauphin County discuss the information on a conference call prior to making a determination regarding our individual districts. This allows us to pool our information and come up with a very well-considered plan. We do not always agree and there are cases when individual districts take a different course than the majority. This was not the case on Thursday. We all agreed to dismissing students early based on what we believed was the best possible information from many credible sources. Every school district superintendent on the call decided to an early dismissal at or before noon.

The decision to dismiss the middle and high schools at 10:45 am and the elementary schools at noon was made before any precipitation had begun. We were well into the dismissal process when it began to snow. As the roads deteriorated, the bus runs slowed and this caused major delays on the middle and high school routes. These delays resulted in a significant backlog at the elementary schools as well.

It is important to know that we not only transport many of our own 12,000 students, but also students from 51 non-public schools. This is a very complex undertaking on a good day. We depend on good communication between the Durham School Services providers and our transportation and administrative staff. On days like Thursday, the lines of communication can be difficult to maintain, especially when numerous buses are late and others have pulled off the road for safety reasons. As soon as individual schools are notified of buses that are running late, they generally communicate that specific information to the families of students on the affected buses. However, as the day progressed, the information pipeline slowed significantly. For example, a bus that was thought to be

stuck would find a way to move several minutes later. Assistance would arrive at the reported scene only to find that the bus had already moved along on its route. This happened repeatedly on Thursday.

Parent Reunification

When it became clear that the roads made it impossible for some students to get home safely, the drivers were told to take the students to the Central Dauphin East High School cafeteria to await parent reunification. We left secretaries in all buildings to answer the phones and summoned all school principals to CD East High School to meet the students who might arrive there. We set up a reunification center involving administrators who used laptops to get information to contact parents and to verify their identities as they arrived to take their students home. This system worked very well. Nearly 50 students were dropped off at the cafeteria to await parent pick-ups. As they waited, we gave students sandwiches, fruit, breakfast bars, milk, and other items. Elementary students were given markers and paper to help pass the time. Our principals interacted with the students and made the wait an enjoyable one. We also had a bus from Dauphin County Technical School that included about 20 high school students. They were also given food and beverages. Many parents were caught on the highways and took hours to arrive. Others provided us with information regarding family members who were permitted to take students home. In a few cases, parents had no means of transportation and we were able to take students home later in district vehicles. By 6:10 pm, all students had been reunited with their families.

Please know that our teaching staff remains at the buildings with students until the final student leaves the school. In addition, principals and secretaries are not permitted to close the buildings until we have confirmed that every child has arrived home safely on the bus. This took hours on Thursday and many of our staff stayed well beyond the end of the work day with no complaints. Their dedication to the safety and comfort of our students is a remarkable asset of our district.

I would like to thank the drivers and staff of Durham School Services and Boyo Transportation for their dedication to safety and the mission of getting all students home safely. They proceeded with great caution on Thursday and refused to take risks that may have shortened their routes. Many of them assisted buses that were stuck and helped the process get back on track. Some drivers waited at the East High cafeteria in case they would be needed to continue transporting those students home. This is another indication of the efforts of these incredible drivers who are charged with keeping our students safe in very challenging circumstances.

The staff of the central administration, the principals, and the school secretaries should also be commended for their professionalism and determination to get every child home safely. This can be a challenge when emotions are running high and there is uncertainty about the weather and road conditions. Please know that we work as a team and value the input of all of the professionals who work in our district. This has always helped us effectively manage and persist in difficult situations. Throughout this day, we were very fortunate. No students or staff were injured and everyone eventually arrived home safely. While there was an incident involving a student driver, he got home safely as well.

After-Action Considerations

During our after-action discussions this morning, we worked with Durham School Services and the CDS transportation department to develop additional plans to help streamline and solidify a system that will ensure fewer disruptions in our communications between schools and families when certain

buses will be significantly delayed. This information will also help us determine when or whether to open a parent reunification site as we did during Thursday's weather event.

We understand the great concern and frustration that results when emergency situations arise. We assure you that the decisions we make as to whether or not to close school are based on numerous factors. We did the best anyone could be expected to do in deciding a course of action on Thursday morning. We will continue to use the many sources of data and information that are available to us in order to make the best decision possible during such circumstances. We appreciate the support of the many parents who expressed appreciation of our efforts to get students home safely. We want to assure you that we are committed to work to continuously improve these critical processes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carol Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Carol Johnson, Ed. D.
Superintendent