



West Orange Public Schools

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Acting Superintendent of Schools

Mrs. Eveny de Mendez

November 17, 2018

Dear West Orange School Community,

The decision to open or close schools in bad weather is never easy. It has an immense effect on our school families, community and staff. And while there are many factors that go into making this decision, ensuring the safety and well-being of our students is our paramount priority and responsibility. My responsibility.

How is an informed and measured decision made?

Forecasts. Original weather reports forecasted a mix of rain and snow, with predictions of increased snow in the afternoon. Later reports, with shifting snow times, did not predict the gravity of this storm, its early arrival, or higher snow totals than the 1-3 inches originally forecasted.

Essex County Schools. As is the practice in all school districts, I conferred with other superintendents of Essex County, as well as our in-house departments throughout the evening and into the morning. Based on the forecasts and information available to us, we believed an early dismissal would present transportation complications and a hardship for our parents. We also believed that we would be able to get our students home before the heavier snow arrived. Leveraging our collective experience, we all decided to cancel afternoon and evening activities and proceed with a full day of instruction.

Early Dismissal Considerations. The current protocol in place advises that early dismissal considerations are to be made the evening prior to a school closure in order to provide parents with ample opportunity to arrange for child-care, especially at the Pre-K and elementary level. Based on the information available, the forecasts did not warrant sending students home early and putting our parents in that position. We experienced unprecedented traffic patterns and timing, traffic gridlock and road closures during dismissal, which grew worse as rush hour arrived. There were simply no advanced warnings or predictions of the seriousness of this weather event.

So what happened?

State Closure of Route 280. On Route 280, State Police were forced to close two lanes. Instant gridlocks formed that did not permit cars or buses to move. GPS applications rerouted an unprecedented number of cars through West Orange making the roads impassible and our buses were at a standstill. Dual lanes on Northfield Avenue became an east-bound 7 lane highway, which officers could only navigate on foot. Our initial inability to transport students home was not the snow, but the gridlock. Ninety-five (95) cars were abandoned in West Orange. Together with 41 accidents, 8 car fires, 24 ambulance calls and quickly falling snow that far exceeded all of the forecasts. The community was crippled, alongside our neighboring towns.

Essex County School Districts. Essex County Districts, at large, did not close early. Schools and districts throughout the County faced similar circumstances at varying degrees. Buses were unable to transport students home, and we were each faced with keeping students in their care late into the night. Thank you to our neighboring superintendents who maintained communication with us throughout the storm.

Our Response

Getting our students to a secure location. For our buses en route, the West Orange Police, Fire, and Public Works departments collaboratively aided us in rerouting our standing buses to safe locations. Regrettably, due to the gridlock, weather, and measures far beyond their control, this took an inordinate amount of time of up to six hours, some possibly longer. Students and drivers did not have access to bathrooms or food during this period. Some high school students, in their frustration, chose to exit the buses and walked home. I am very sorry that our students and drivers experienced this impossibly stressful situation. I am also grateful that there were no accidents or incidents. No students were hurt. Parents desiring to pick up their children at bus locations were permitted to do so upon verification of identity. All students, although impacted, were eventually routed to safe locations and returned home safely.

The majority of these buses were rerouted to Chit Chat Diner and a few to our local library. The owners of Chit Chat welcomed our students with open arms, fed all of them at their expense, and provided our students with shelter until the WOPD was able to bring them to the high school. Thank you to the owners and the staff who provided for our students in a time of need. We are grateful for their kind and generous donation and for the staff at the West Orange Public Library for helping us shelter our students.

Sheltering in Place. All schools sheltered in place and immediately began to accommodate their students. They prepared snacks, made pizza and pasta dinners, and planned for activities that would take them into the night. Our teachers, paraprofessionals, staff and school leaders, committed themselves to the service and care of our students. Our nurses ensured that all medical and allergy considerations were adhered to. Our parents, PTA and community neighbors provided support and supplies at our sites, such as blankets, pillows, sleeping bags and coffee. Sodexo gave us access to their kitchens and Oak Barrel delivered dinner to Edison Middle School.

Thank you to all of our school leaders who led the charge and managed the situation with excellence. They are to be commended for their leadership, for staying in high spirits, for motivating their staff, and leading by example. I am honored to be part of such an amazing team.

Thank you to Sodexo for giving us access to snacks and meals for our students and for trusting our team leaders to cook in your kitchens.

I want to thank our students, who demonstrated remarkable resilience and character as they worked together to “make lemonade out of lemons”, while tweeting their memorable moments.

Most of all, I want to thank all of our teachers, staff, and parents, for selflessly emulating the spirit of “*We are West Orange*”, for providing and caring for our students, and for exceeding every expectation we could have imagined.

Securing our Schools. All schools were secured and strictly adhered to a shelter in place protocol. Schools remained heavily staffed by school administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, and at the high school and middle schools, security. Only school personnel were permitted into the buildings, with the exception of a school bus with students and staff from a neighboring town, who also sheltered in place with us at Gregory Elementary School. All parents entering the schools were required to verify their identity. Students were constantly monitored throughout the entire night. Thankfully, there were no incidents or mishaps.

Local Officials. Our local officials worked tirelessly to clear our roads and methodically helped us to reroute our buses, reach our students, and bring them to shelter. Officers, despite the 1895 emergency calls they received throughout the community, 303 of which they had to directly respond to, maintained constant communication with our teams and schools for the entirety of the event. Where necessary, they made their way to our students with the greatest need and brought them to the police station, where they were supervised by a

district staff member until their parents arrived. In the morning, they aided the district in transporting students who remained in our care to their homes, whose parents still did not have access to transportation. Finally, after all students and staff were safely home, our buildings closed at 10:30am, on Friday morning.

Thank you to the Chief of Police and to all of his officers; to the Superintendent of Public Works and to all of his staff; to the Fire Chief and to the fire department personnel, and to all of our local officials who made themselves available to protect and serve the students and staff of West Orange.

Thank you to our district staff member who spent the night at the police station, serving the students with greatest need; for being in constant contact with our office and their parents, so that they were apprised of the student's whereabouts, and assured that they were safe.

Transportation Department. Our transportation department, in partnership with the Hunterdon County Educational Services Commission, maintained consistent communication with the administration to identify bus locations, names of students on buses, and status updates, with the sole priority of keeping students and drivers safe. Over 20 bus drivers, without students on their buses, who never made it to their destination, patiently remained on the road for up to 10 hours, understanding that buses with students on them were the top priority, and they would be rerouted first.

Thank you to our transportation departments and their leaders. Thank you, especially, to our bus drivers and monitors, for their perseverance and alertness, for attending to our students, for staying safe and focused, and for managing the conditions without accident or incident.

Communication. District offices remained open and staffed throughout the night in order to mobilize all communication efforts. Via conference calls and in collaboration with our local police, public works and transportation departments, we were able to collectively secure the safety of our students. Postings, phone blasts and emails were made to parents as we received updates. Telephone calls to central office and school buildings were responded to and, as much as possible, parents asking specific questions about their children on social media were contacted with updates. Telephone, group chats and email were used to communicate with our school leaders to provide updates as promptly as possible.

Thank you to my cabinet members, John Calavano, School Business Administrator and Kristin Gogerty, Director of Special Services, who co-led the emergency response effort with responsiveness, decisiveness, resolution and grace; who alongside our central office and technology staff stayed the night to help me efficiently manage in obtaining all pertinent information; assisted in streamlining communications between transportation, Sodexo, buildings and grounds, schools, and local officials; located students in their respective locations and contacted parents with the same; helped craft and post updates and school messenger notices; and answered and responded to the influx of parent calls.

What would we do differently? Next steps.

Hindsight is 20/20, so err on the side of caution. I began this update stating that the decision to open or close schools is never easy. The question around early dismissal is the major factor. While our experience with this Nor'easter was not unique to West Orange; and schools throughout all of Essex County had students on buses and in their buildings well into the night, calling an early dismissal the night before would have made the difference. I lament that our students, families, and staff were so greatly impacted by this event. I agree and commit to, in the future, erring on the side of caution. In saying this, however, a considerable factor remains; the majority of calls received in our office, were by the parents who were unable to arrive to their homes from work for greater than 10 hours; parents who abandoned their cars and walked two and three hours thinking their younger child would be home alone, because they were trapped in the same gridlock as our buses. But they weren't. They weren't home alone. They were safe. In our schools. With our staff.

Establish comprehensive protocols for early dismissal. With our climate changes, winters are increasingly growing in severity. Last year we exceeded our snow days and had to shorten the spring break. This year, our first winter storm is in November. Compounding the weather patterns is the geographical landscape of West Orange. We have a mountainous terrain that makes transportation more susceptible to risk in severe weather conditions. The district, then, must develop, in collaboration with our Township, parents, and staff, comprehensive protocols for same-day early dismissals.

Acquire needed technology for buses. Transportation is at the forefront of district discussions. Buses must be equipped with GPSs that can be tracked by the district as well as identification swipes that would provide us with instant access to student passengers, their addresses and emergency contact information. More detailed information can then be provided to local officials, schools and parents throughout emergency events. A major reason for delays in communication were due to manually having to call buses through two-way radios to identify locations and student passengers.

Emergency Information Protocols. A central location for obtaining information on our district website will be created, in order for parents to easily access updates that apply directly to their situation. Communication was impacted by the need to manually send messages bus by bus, student by student, in order to message the correct audience. A hotline protocol will be established in order to facilitate a command center where parents could get accurate information from one set office that has real time updates.

Emergency Response Team Protocols. In collaboration with local officials, we will establish formal emergency response team protocols specifically for inclement weather. Additionally, we will identify a detailed plan for implementation, rerouting, shelter in place locations, and communication and roles, in order to obtain greater efficiency during emergencies.

Full Report & Updates

On Monday, November 19th, the following groups will conduct formal debrief sessions to review the details of this weather event, identify areas of strength and improvement, and provide a full report to the community, with recommendations to the Board of Education at it's November 20th Board meeting.

- Hunterdon County Educational Services Commission
- West Orange Transportation Department
- Mayor's Office and Local Officials
- West Orange School Leaders

In Closing

The impact of this weather event on the entire the State of New Jersey, and specifically on the town of West Orange, indelibly showcased with it both the strength of our community over what appeared to be insurmountable circumstances, and the protocols that need to be established to better address situations like these in the future. I am grateful for the safety of our students. I am also grateful for the safety found in community. Our children arrived home safely, without incident or accident. Again, I want to thank our local leaders, our amazing staff, our parents and students who all came together in a time of crisis to demonstrate why West Orange is truly a great and caring community.

Respectfully,



Evelyn de Mendez

Acting Superintendent of Schools