Snow Days

Is Distance Education a Solution in K-12 Schools?

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As of the writing of this article, my children have missed 10 days of school and have had several (I have lost count) 2-hour delayed starts because of school cancelations due to snow and/or cold. Although these were not consecutive days lost, clearly the disruption, costs, and missed learning opportunities for not attending school add up. How can teachers manage so much disruption to learning? How can they make the most of this lost time, even when make-up days are scheduled? What are possible solutions?

Many schools across the United States have started allowing "e-learning days," some of which can be used to make up missed school days legally, to address the lost time resulting from school cancelations (cf. Baker, 2014; Gumbrecht, 2014; Morones, 2014; Richman, 2014). Leading this trend are legislators in the state of Ohio who passed a 2011 law that allows for "A school district, community, STEM, or chartered nonpublic school … to use online lessons and paper-lesson 'blizzard bags' to make up a total of three calamity days" (Wann, 2014) as long as it has submitted a plan to the Ohio Department of Education by August 1 of that year.

As an online educator, I can see why school leaders might view online education as a key to the school cancelation challenge—and it makes perfect sense this would be part of any school's emergency plan, after all, school can be canceled for reasons other than weather-related ones. However, for those of us who teach online, we know firsthand how much time and effort it takes to design, develop, and implement quality and meaningful online educational experiences. Moreover, I am very concerned about online education being thrust upon learners, particularly those for whom it is not developmentally, motivationally, and/or technologically appropriate, and with no input or preparation for how to be successful online learners or what to expect from online assignments.

Important factors to consider when determining how to incorporate e-learning are whether or not students have access to technology and/or the Internet at home. Even in households that have a computer and Internet connectivity, every student in the home cannot access the same computer at the same time to complete schoolwork. How do families negotiate who gets to complete her/his work and when? What if the home environment is loud and/or very crowded? What if the children hear other children playing outside in the snow? How conducive to learning is the

home environment when everyone is home at the same time and stuck inside? What if there is no power? What if parents/guardians also need to work from home? All of these are questions that should be considered!

What Can Schools do to Prepare?

There are numerous steps school leaders can take to help not only teachers, but also students and their parents/guardians prepare for e-learning days, particularly when such decisions are made at 5 A.M. the day in which a snow day will take place.

1. Be prepared. Develop a plan before there is a need! It is important for school leaders also to keep a close eye on conditions that may result in school closure. Five in the morning the day in which school is canceled is not the time to be asking teachers to develop e-learning lessons!
2. Develop a plan. What are the expectations for students? How much work should they complete? How should teachers communicate with students? What is a reasonable deadline for assignments? What if students do not have access or the ability to work? What is the "tipping point" for requiring e-learning—is it 1, 2, 3+ missed days? How much work should be assigned (e.g., a full day's worth, half day)?
3. Be flexible. It is important for all stakeholders to understand that flexibility is key. Assignments may not be "perfect," Internet connectivity and electricity may be sporadic, among many other variables that might affect a student's ability to complete assignments.
4. Be available. If possible, educators should be available to answer questions about the assignments. This is particularly important if there will be a test—students *will* have questions (as will parents/guardians!) and they will need to contact their teachers for answers. It is critical for students to know how to contact teachers and for them to receive answers in a timely manner.
5. Educate all stakeholders about timing of communications, expectations, etc. Students, parents/guardians, and teachers should be prepared for any e-learning assignments. They should know, with as much advance notice as possible, when students will receive assignments, when they will be due, and how to submit them.
6. Acknowledge the digital divide. Not all students will have access at home to a computer or the Internet, and even when they do, this will not mean that they can work on assignments since another sibling, relative, and even a parent/guardian might need to work on the home computer.
7. Weigh the impact on parents/guardians. Many parents/guardians also have to juggle their own work whether they have the flexibility to telework or must find a way to get to work, as well as find someone to care for their children. Swarns (2014) touched upon some of the challenges parents/guardians experience when juggling working from home while also caring for children.
8. Assign developmentally appropriate schoolwork. Assignments should be assigned based on the students' abilities and also so that they can work independently. This may require differentiation of lessons for students. Not all parents/guardians will be home and/or able to assist their children.
9. Practice assigning work online both in school and at home. If there is an expectation to make-up a school day (or portions thereof), then students should have some practice with how to receive, complete, and submit assignments. Their first experience

with e-learning should not be a snow day. They should be comfortable with this approach—practice will help achieve this.

10. Assess/reflect on how e-learning worked. As with any experience, it is important to assess how it worked for all students. There should also be assessments of both the practice run(s) and the actual e-learning day. Clearly there will be challenges and digital inequity, yet these cannot be addressed or accommodated without assessment and reflection on how it worked both during the practice run(s) and after a school cancelation.
11. Develop alternatives for students with limited or no access at home. Not all students will be able to complete the work. Therefore, teachers will need to develop alternate paths and time lines for students to complete the work.
12. Get stakeholder buy-in. All stakeholders should have an opportunity to learn about the possibility of e-learning, as well as to practice it. Educate the community, including the students who will be affected most!
13. Consider that kids will be kids. When my 10-year-old son was assigned several hours of work (on the ninth snow day), it was difficult for him to concentrate because he heard our neighborhood children sledding down the hill in our backyard—which also is the best sledding hill on our block! Factor in that kids will want to enjoy the snow, too.
14. Provide teachers professional development. There are many effective strategies for employing e-learning in teaching. However, even strategies such as the popular "flipped classroom approach" (Milman, 2012) have their limitations. Teachers today need to be knowledgeable, innovative, and selective about the choices they make that impact student learning.

E-learning should not be a day full of "busywork" that is disconnected from students' face-to-face learning experiences. It should be a planned, meaningful, engaging learning experience that takes into account the wide variety of learning environments (students' homes) in which learning will take place.

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