

## Press Clippings 01/31/2019

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### What's closed during today's extreme cold

By: Eric Peterson



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Libraries often are regarded among the most accessible and accommodating of public places, but many in the suburbs will close Wednesday due to the region's extreme cold.

And they represent just the tip of the you-know-what among the dozens of government functions planning a subzero shutdown for at least a day -- from schools and park district facilities to courthouses and garbage collection.

Human safety was the reason cited for the early decision several made Tuesday.

Among the libraries telling their patrons and staff to stay home are the Arlington Heights Memorial Library, Schaumburg Township District Library, Barrington Area Public Library, Gail Borden Public Library District in Elgin, Algonquin Area Public Library, Cook Memorial Public Library District facilities in Libertyville and Vernon Hills and the Vernon Area Public Library in Lincolnshire.

"While we strive to keep our libraries open as much as possible during inclement weather, the extremely low temperatures pose a danger to our staff traveling to and from work," Cook Memorial Director David Archer said.

Vernon Area officials said they don't want anyone -- patrons or employees -- going outside in the bitter cold.

"Any travel adds a risk -- a car accident, or your car not starting at the end of the day, for example -- that can put you in a dangerous situation," library spokeswoman Catherine Savage said. "With the expected wind chills, frostbite can develop in a matter of minutes."

Savage said library staff typically doesn't encounter customers coming to the library to escape cold weather. If large parts of the community lose power, causing a home-heating crisis, library leaders will consider opening in an emergency, she said.

Schools, of course, aren't strangers to closing due to winter weather, but Elgin Area School District U-46 CEO Tony Sanders said some of the dangers of cold are distinct from the more typical snow day.

The distance some students have to walk and the amount of time others wait outside for school buses led to his decision to close Illinois' second-largest school district on both Wednesday and Thursday.

"To walk a mile and a half in this weather is not appropriate," Sanders said.

Another problem of cold is that the hydraulic braking systems of buses are more vulnerable to being affected by it than are most smaller vehicles, he added.

Also, while the timing of a snowstorm might allow streets, sidewalks and parking lots to be cleared before school, there's nothing to be done to counteract the coming cold snap while it lasts, Sanders said.

"To the extent that you can stay home, stay home," he said.

The cancellation of Schaumburg Township Elementary District 54's classes and after-school activities through Thursday evening includes Wednesday's open-enrollment fair for unique education programs at specific schools.

Schaumburg Park District facilities also will be closed for the cold through 9 a.m. Thursday, eliminating them as an recreational option for students out of school.

Garbage pickup also might be affected by the cold in suburban communities. In Rolling Meadows, for example, garbage and recycling pickup will be delayed one day for the remainder of the week. Wednesday's pickup will be moved to Thursday, Thursday's pickup moved to Friday and Friday's pickup to Saturday.

Keeping people out of danger while traveling led Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans to close the Circuit Court of Cook County both Wednesday and Thursday, with the exception of bond hearings and some pretrial matters for in-custody defendants at both the Leighton Criminal Court Building and the Juvenile Center in Chicago.

Jurors already assigned to trials won't have to report Wednesday or Thursday, while those first summoned for jury duty on both days will be sent new assigned dates, court officials said.

Courts also will be closed Wednesday and Thursday in DuPage, Lake and McHenry counties.

U.S. Postal Service officials said no cancellation of mail delivery is expected Wednesday or Thursday, extreme conditions in some places could cause a delay of hours or a whole day. Mail carriers are among the most knowledgeable and best prepared for such extremes, they added.

One thing residents can do to help expedite delivery, however, is ensure that postal workers have a clear path to mailboxes.

Those hoping to find something else to do during a day off work should be aware that many private businesses and restaurants also will be closed. Remember to call first.

In fact, it's expected to be so cold that outer space itself will be closed through a two-day shutdown of Chicago's Adler Planetarium. Officials described the coming cold as dangerous and said the safety of guests and employees was their highest priority.

A growing list of confirmed agency closings can be checked at [emergencyclosingcenter.com](http://emergencyclosingcenter.com).

## **Behind-the-scenes look at how schools decide to close for severe weather: Safety, state laws and snow-day assignments**

**By: Kate Thayer**



- Edgar Gutierrez pulls his daughter Martha, 10, on a sled on the hill near Montrose Beach on Jan. 28, 2019.

They're the words kids go to sleep dreaming about: "Snow day!"

But for school officials, the decision to close schools for weather conditions like this week's one-two punch of snow and [subzero temperatures](#) is far from simple.

School administrators throughout the Chicago area say they pore over weather forecasts and road conditions, and consult colleagues in their own district and others before making the call to close schools.

And while some parents and students are grateful for the midwinter time off, others fret about what kids will do while parents work, as well as the possibility of makeup days tacked onto the end of the school year when families are ready to jump into summer activities. A recent change in state law has some districts turning the old system on its head by offering self-directed learning activities for students to do at home while stuck indoors this week.

Here's a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into the decision to cancel school:

### **Safety first**

“The right decision doesn't exist, because no matter what you decide, you're going to upset somebody,” said Tony Sanders, chief executive officer of Elgin-based School District U-46, the second-largest district in the state.

While the top priority is the health and safety of students and staff in their trek to school, there are other factors, Sanders said, especially in his district, which is about 60 percent low income. In deciding whether to close schools, he not only considers the frigid temperatures and road conditions, but also where students will be if they can't go to school.

“For some students, this is their meal, this is their heat during the day,” he said. “We are so much more than a school.”

In the announcement to close Chicago Public Schools on Wednesday and Thursday, officials advised students to “stay indoors” and provided information on the city's warming centers. The Chicago Park District also offered drop-in centers as a safe, warm place for students.

### **Seeking consensus**

Like other school officials, Sanders said he's constantly looking at weather forecasts as he weighs his decisions. He said he drives the roads himself early in the morning and consults leaders in surrounding districts.

Police and fire officials also weigh in, officials said.

“It's better to have multiple inputs on this,” said Tom Hernandez, spokesman for Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202.

While some schools own buses and employ their own drivers, other districts, like Plainfield, hire an outside company to oversee transportation, Hernandez said. That's another voice to consider before making the call.

“That becomes an issue if drivers cannot get to work to drive their bus,” he said. “They're not our staff, so we can't cover for them.”

### **State requirements**

Illinois state law dictates that schools must offer students at least 176 “instructional days” and set aside five “emergency days” to make up for any canceled days, according to Jackie Matthews, spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education. If all

emergency days are used, the district can ask for approval from state and regional education officials to use an Act of God Day, which is not required to be made up.

Outside of those mandates, it's up to local districts to decide when to cancel school and how to make up the days, she said.

### **At-home assignments**

A change in state law in 2017 allows districts to define an instructional day. [The change allows districts, including Wilmette Public Schools District 39](#) and Libertyville District 70, to this week launch alternative programs that provide students self-directed activities to do from home. These at-home learning days are considered instructional days, so no extra days will be added to the end of the school year.

"Businesses have this model. You can work from home," so why not schools? said Erik Youngman, District 70's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

During days off this week, Libertyville students must participate in Self Directed Learning Days assignments at home. If they don't complete them, they will be marked absent, Youngman said. Students can choose from a variety of options, depending on their grade level, and have one week to turn the assignment in to their teacher.

Examples of work completed by students, so far, includes labeling household items in another language, cooking something and blogging about it, practicing math or researching a topic, Youngman said.

"This gives us an opportunity to be creative," he said, and it avoids using emergency days in early June. "This is better learning than that, I would argue." He has received mixed feedback about the new program from parents so far, Youngman added.

But while students must engage in learning, and submit proof to their teachers, the days are not designed to have students "sit in front of a computer for hours."

"Maybe it's a snow day, and they want to go out and play."

### **Virtual pleas**

In the age of social media connectivity and instant gratification, Superintendent Dan Bridges, of Naperville Community Unit District 203, said he often uses the analogy of a baseball game for anxious, curious parents and students.

"The White Sox don't cancel a game if the forecast says there might be rain," he said. "It's the same approach here. As we know with Chicago-area weather, it can change in moments."

Given the extreme cold predicted Wednesday and Thursday, Bridges said it was important for student safety to make the call early to close schools. But often he's up late at night and again early in the morning to make his final call, prompting anticipation on social media.

Like other district administrators, Bridges' Twitter feed is filled with creative suggestions and feedback from students in the form of GIFs and memes with Bridges' face, or quoting from his school-closing announcements.

“And Dan said...,” one student tweet this week read, and then Bridges’ school-closing announcement was quoted, appearing like a Bible verse.

“For the most part, I do enjoy and appreciate the sense of humor and creativity of our kids,” Bridges said. “It’s a fun way to engage on some level.”

Sanders, of District U-46, said he gets the same attention on Twitter, with his head pasted onto various famous characters.

“I’ve been Jesus, I’ve been Thor, I’ve been Captain America when I did close school,” he said. “Students find a way to really demonstrate their talents and abilities in technology.”

## **Canceling school no easy decision for Elgin-area officials, who say there’s more to it than making up the day later**

**By: Rafael Guerrero**



- A November snowstorm, which left school buses and roads needing to be shoveled out, prompted U46 CEO Tony Sanders to close school on Nov. 26.

Closing schools for one day is a tough call for district administrators. Closing schools for three days in one week is almost unprecedented.

That’s what happened this week, when most area schools shut down Monday because of the snowstorm that moved through in the morning and then again Wednesday and Thursday as a result of record subzero temperatures were as low as 24 degrees below zero Wednesday morning and never climbed higher than minus-15 in most areas.

As a result of that and a previous snow day, most schools have used four emergency day, one shy of the maximum five allowed by the state.

“It’s never an easy decision to cancel classes and we only do so when absolutely necessary for the safety of our students,” said Lezlie Fuhr, principal of the Elgin Math and Science Academy.

The charter school largely follows School District U46’s lead since some families and staff have children who attend U46 schools.

U46 CEO Tony Sanders has used social media to explain why school has been canceled — or not canceled — to students, parents and employees. His [Facebook](#) and Twitter accounts have become popular for those waiting to hear, or try to influence, Sanders’ decision.

Sanders said the advent of social media allows him and the district to be more transparent about the decisions they make. On Monday, Sanders shared video of his visit to the district's school bus depot as personnel began clearing buses so class could be back in session Tuesday. Despite that, not everyone was in agreement with his call.

Social media can amplify both praise and scorn, Sanders said. Outlets like Twitter or Facebook, though, do allow for students, parents and staff to weigh in on the process, which he said is a benefit.

In the case of Wednesday and Thursday, the decision to close was easy, Sanders said. The forecasts for the historically cold temperatures never changed during the week leading up to those days and wind chills 25 degrees below zero are just too dangerous for anyone to be outside, he said.

The decision, he said, is also more than academic.

“For a district like U46, about 60 percent come from low-income households,” Sanders said. “For a lot of families, schools are places of warmth, places where a child gets a meal.”

Schools must also take in consideration how a school closure will affect parents, many of whom may have to take a day off of work or have a child care problem as a result, he said. U46 staff members have same problem since many live in other school districts where school may or may not be canceled.

In St. Charles School District 303, the final decision is made by the superintendent, district spokeswoman Carol Smith. A number of factors come into play — [National Weather Service](#) forecasts, road conditions, whether school sidewalks and parking lots can be cleared in time, and road and sidewalk conditions of the neighborhoods from where students will be coming, Smith said.

District officials often check in with each other to see if they're planning to open or close and why, she said. On Monday, districts like St. Charles waited until the early morning to cancel classes because snowfall didn't start until after midnight. The subzero forecast made it easier than usual to make the decision to cancel, Smith said.

“It was not a difficult decision to close today and tomorrow because it is not safe for our students to be out in these temperatures,” she said.

Four emergency days is the most U46 has used since the 2013-14 school year, Sanders said. District 303 has not exceeded four days in the last 30 years, according to Smith.

School districts can exceed five emergency days, but only under the Illinois State Board of Education's “Act of God” exemption, which must be requested. Approval comes from the regional superintendent and the state superintendent of education and, if approved, the days do not need to be added to the end of the school year like the first five will have to be.