

Why do schools close when it snows?

The following article was written during the heavy snow this year by a school in Norfolk and published by the Eastern Daily Press (Source article can be found [here](#)). It highlights the rationale and thought process that goes into making the decision to close a school due to the snow.

“To close or not to close, that is the question?”

Over 3000 schools have shut nationally over the last few days. This much is true. Each school will have considered their unique circumstances very carefully. Schools are not wrong to close, they are not wrong to stay open. They are only wrong if they do not have a carefully thought through rationale. It is rarely opportunistic and despite the view of some, it's actually quite stressful because we know the knock on effects all too well.

The process of deciding normally starts when weather warnings come through and continue late into the night. I know it's not uncommon for heads to sleep very badly as they weather watch rising hourly to gaze out the window and message their team.

The following are things I consider. It is not exhaustive and other schools may have other considerations for example exams and school bus services:

- How severe is the weather based on our previous experience?
- Can I get to school safely and if not can my deputy and other senior staff?
- Will there be appropriate experience to manage safeguarding and health and safety on site including qualified first aiders and paediatric first aiders?
- Can sufficient numbers of staff reach school safely to provide education?
- Can sufficient numbers of staff reach school to provide child care safely?
- Can families get to school safely?

- When on site can we meet the needs of individual children safely?
- Is the site safe so large groups can move around safely, for instance if we had to evacuate quickly?
- If we had to evacuate, would it be safe for our children to be outside for a sustained period?
- Would children with specific conditions i.e. Asthma, be safe outside for sustained periods?
- Could the emergency services reach us quickly if necessary?
- Does the weather during the day pose a risk for children not being collected due to families being delayed?
- Will staff be able to get home safely, considering too, that many have children who may be sent home from school early?
- Does our school serve a community of families that work in essential services whereby closing school has a negative impact on wider services i.e NHS staff?
- Could opening school ultimately mean we place other services under further pressure by increasing traffic incidents when police have issued warnings not to travel?
- Can we provide warm meals?
- Do we place our school under pressure of criticism and injury claims?

At our school we tend to use a risk benefit approach. This, put simply means, do the benefits outweigh the risks? I have to consider the safety needs of our children, the community, of staff, many of whom have dependents, young and old and the wider possible impact on services, before the longer term educational needs. On this occasion my judgement has been that the risks are greater than the benefits so have regrettably closed school for three days. I have never done this for this amount of time. It is not an easy option, and many schools will be feeling the pressure in what is already a short term. As part of the process we may also contact other services. For instance, Children's

Services to say we are worried because we are not in daily contact with a vulnerable child. I have also contacted my local school to say I'm available if I can help. We try very hard to make timely decisions for our community and inevitably that is a risk in itself, as we know weather forecasters don't always get it right either.

So please be patient whatever the decision your school has made, it will have been with the best interests of the community it serves and not done on a whim. And an end note, those who jump quickly to criticise and compare us to other organisations who have to continue in extreme conditions like the police, fire and ambulances and the army; we are a universal service not an emergency one. And are you the very same person who very quickly jumps into criticise if something goes wrong in school if we made a different decision? Whatever your experience has been, school leaders will hope that children will have relished in the unusual amount of snow but will be very keen to return to normal services as soon as it is safely possible to do so."