

Let's stop whining about school snow closures

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: January 23 at 6:54 pm

Some Washington area school districts are suddenly the target of criticism for keeping schools closed after Tuesday's snowstorm.

A Post colleague over at the [great Weather Gang blog](#), in fact, wrote about Fairfax County's decision to stay closed Thursday after officials decided that some of the roads and walkways were still too dangerous for parents and kids to use. The blog post said in part:

President Obama implied [Washingtonians were weather wimps](#) in 2009. Fairfax County is proving itself to be a poster child for such a characterization.

Really?

It wasn't just Fairfax that stayed closed Thursday: Prince William County schools were too. Loudoun County schools are closed all week, and mid-term exams have been canceled. Other districts are opening on Friday, but with two-hour delays.

School districts don't actually like closing schools. It creates huge scheduling problems and other sorts of headaches they would rather avoid. They do it when they think that it is the wiser course of action for kids who sometimes have to come to school in the dark, from rural areas, at long distances. Sometimes they may be too cautious, but erring on that side of the risk equation is far preferable than the other.

Here's a statement Fairfax issued explaining its decision:

FCPS' primary concern is always student safety when making a decision about opening schools. We consider all the methods of transportation that FCPS students use to get to school: school buses, walking to schools or bus stops, parent drivers, and student drivers. The decision-making process especially considers those teenagers who drive to high schools in the early morning hours before it is light, those students who walk, and those students waiting at bus stops. There are also many students who attend schools, centers, or programs that are long distances from their homes.

In addition to main arteries such as I-66 and I-495, the county's transportation system also includes narrow, winding roads in still relatively rural parts of the county such as Clifton and Great Falls. Fairfax County encompasses approximately 400 square miles and road conditions can vary significantly in different parts of the county. Yesterday and last evening, FCPS transportation supervisors traveled the routes our buses would traverse and inspected bus stops and the pathways walkers would be taking and found that throughout Fairfax County there were still considerable areas that were unsafe and treacherous. While VDOT has done an outstanding job with the main arteries, there are continuing safety concerns with secondary roads and sidewalks.

We are hopeful that the additional time will give road crews, homeowners associations, and private citizens the opportunity they need to clear roads and sidewalks so that students may safely return to school.

It makes sense to me.

The Weather Gang's Jason Samenow also wrote:

I don't care if you're driving a school bus, a smart car or limousine, driving on an inch of compacted snow is totally doable.

That seems to make sense, too, except when I was driving in the District on Thursday on a road that had a thin covering of snow but a whole lot of ice, the car slipped and slid. Good thing I was going very slow.

There are a lot of considerations that go into deciding whether to close schools or not, including where bus drivers, teachers and other staff live. Parents may not think Fairfax is transparent enough with the way it makes its closing decisions, and they may be correct. But I don't know why school districts should become the target of derision when they make a call to close a school for weather-related reasons.

If you really want to whine about something, how about:

- a) Underfunded schools
 - b) Underpaid teachers
 - c) Too many standardized tests
 - d) Boring curriculum
- etc.

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