

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Snow Days Turn Into E-Learning Days for Some Schools

## Winter storms yield widespread closings

By **Alyssa Morones**

In what is proving to be an uncommonly chilly and snowy winter, thousands of schools across many states have been forced to close their doors—often for days at a time. Although a lot of students have surely tossed their books aside in favor of sledding or video games, some schools are seizing on e-learning as a way to keep up educational momentum.

Under an Ohio law that took effect this year, for example, districts that max out on "calamity" days can use up to three "e-learning days" to meet state class-time requirements and avoid having to tack extra days on to the end of the school year.

"It's much better to have a day of e-learning instruction right now than if we held a makeup day when the weather's nice," said Shelly Vaughn, the superintendent of the 939-student Fort Recovery district in western Ohio, which had already missed eight regular school days as of late January. "It's hard to keep kids focused at that time of year."

Meanwhile, the co-teachers of an Advanced Placement calculus class at Grandville High School in Grandville, Mich., where school has been called off for seven days so far this winter, are posting assignments online, as well as instructional videos, to keep students on track.

"When you teach an Advanced Placement class, there's a target day in May when everyone takes the test," said co-teacher Nancy Triezenberg. "I have every day planned out. We know we need to be so far by a certain date."

## Polar Vortex

Between winter storms and the polar vortex that sent temperatures plummeting to near zero, or even below, districts from Illinois to Virginia—and now, in states farther south, like Alabama and Georgia—have lost regular school days this academic year.

In the 400,000-student Chicago Public Schools, where school is rarely canceled, four of the six snow days declared over the past decade came this winter, a spokeswoman said.

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Most Virginia districts already had lost five to 10 days this year to bad weather as of last week, said Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education.

The 50,000-student Henrico County school system, near Richmond, had a surprise weeklong break from classes in mid-January when the district called four snow days the week of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. School was closed yet again for two days last week after another storm hit.

Meanwhile, hundreds of students in Atlanta were left stranded overnight in schools when a recent storm left many areas in the South covered in snow and ice.

Although snow days certainly can be disruptive to a school's schedule, **a new study from Harvard University** finds that they don't seem to have a negative effect on students academically, at least when looking at results on statewide assessments from 2003 to 2010.

The study, issued in January by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, found no correlation between student achievement and snow days, based on an analysis of test scores in those years.

"Just having to push a lesson back one day is not very hard to do," said Joshua S. Goodman, an assistant professor in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and the author of the study.

"What's harder to deal with is when five out of 25 students are missing because of weather," he said.

Mr. Goodman's research did find a negative effect on test scores on moderately snowy days when schools stayed open, but some students were absent because of the weather.

When just some students are absent, Mr. Goodman explained, teachers have to take time from the next day to help those students catch up.

However, a **2008 study** of Maryland public schools, published in the *Journal of Education Finance and Policy*, came to a different conclusion. It found that as snow days accumulated they did have a negative effect, particularly at the elementary level, on student performance on state reading and math assessments.

It found, for instance, that in years with a high level of unscheduled closures—about 10 days—more than 5 percent fewer students would pass the state's standardized 3rd grade reading or math test.

## Blizzard Bags



MICHIGAN: A front end loader fills a trailer with snow to clear off a school bus lot in Kalamazoo, Mich. January temperatures dropped to dangerous, record-breaking lows in Michigan, leading to the closure of hundreds of schools.

—Mark Bugnaski/Kalamazoo Gazette/AP

In Ohio, the state's new flexibility with e-learning days is just starting to catch on, but a spokesman for the state education agency sees momentum building.

Of the state's 614 regular school districts, 95 had submitted plans for e-learning days as of late January.

"We're getting more every day," said John Charlton, a spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education.

The state's new policy is intended to provide districts additional flexibility in meeting minimum school-day requirements and to alleviate the need for adding days at the end of the year to make up lost time.

To implement e-learning days, the state requires districts' teachers to post lessons and assignments online for students to complete during the snow day.

Students will have up to two weeks, though, to complete such an assignment. That is an important qualification for students who may lack access to a computer or the Internet at home, or if they experience a power or Internet outage that day. In such cases, teachers will provide hard copies of the work to their students.

Many districts in Ohio refer to their e-learning options as "blizzard bags," the term for the bag in which teachers send the hard copies home.

The state's Fort Recovery district submitted its e-learning plan last school year, but didn't have to use it until this winter.

The lessons the district offers with its e-learning days "were designed so that students could do them independently," said Ms. Vaughn, the superintendent, "so that parents at home wouldn't need to provide any more support than they would with homework."

"In this day and age, every district has some type of online presence," said Mark Lutz, the principal of Milford High School, located outside Cincinnati. "For us, it's a great opportunity to continue the learning. For days where we can't make it into school, we still have electronic tools available to us."

The various digital platforms that his school uses also allow teachers to interact with students on e-learning days, Mr. Lutz said. "Teachers can post videos with their assignments, or they can post notes," he said.

### **Staying on Track**

At Grandville High School in Michigan, Ms. Triezenberg, the AP calculus co-teacher, said that for the past few years, she has used online technology to provide learning resources for her students, to keep them up to date with the material.

In a year in which the 5,640-student Grandville district already has called six snow days, she's finding it a useful tool. When Ms. Triezenberg and co-teacher Kelly Stouten find out there's a snow day, they send a message to students informing them where online to find the day's assignment.

Students don't just find a worksheet or text lesson on file: Ms. Triezenberg has taken videos of herself teaching the lessons and working out sample problems.

"I feel like when we get back to class, we'll still be on track," she said. "I won't need to be rushing at the end."

She uploads the video in multiple formats so so that students can watch the videos even from their smartphones or iPods.

Before using such technology, Ms. Triezenberg said, snow days would just be lost time.

"I would have to double up on things, or would try to leave something out, which is very difficult in an AP curriculum," she said.

At the same time, she said, the same technology is beneficial not simply for snow days.

"I typically tape most of my classes," she said. "It's wonderful for kids who are absent, or who just want to hear the lesson again."

The Grandville district has made a big push to enhance its use of technology. The district now provides its 4th through 12th graders with Chromebooks. Pupils in kindergarten through grade 3 will be receiving iPads.

The whole district is connected to Moodle, a community-based learning and course-management system that allows teachers to set up blended-learning options, as well as Google Apps for Education.

Ron E. Caniff, the superintendent of the Grandville district, said the technology has been a valuable learning tool, both for snow days and during regular school days. He said that while the use of such technology on snow days does not count toward state class-time requirements, "it does go a long way toward our ultimate objective, which is to keep kids engaged and learning."

That said, Mr. Caniff notes that there are still some hiccups associated with the method, such as the fact that some students still lack Internet access at home.

### **The 'Human Element'**

Some private schools also are tapping e-learning to cope with snow days.



GEORGIA: Mark Nilson walked six miles from his home to spend the night last week with his daughter, Elizabeth, age 5, at E. Rivers Elementary School in Atlanta. —John Spink/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/AP

Bishop Donahue High School, a Roman Catholic school in McMechen, W.Va., now substitutes snow days with "cyber days." On those days, teachers send online assignments for students to complete at home. Students have the opportunity to ask questions by email throughout the afternoon, and assignments are graded at the end of the day.

Gibault Catholic High School in Waterloo, Ill., uses an online learning-management system that works much like an academic social network, allowing students to access resources and interact and collaborate with teachers and fellow classmates.

"We thought: Why not use that for a snow day?" said Principal Russ S. Hart.

The school's use of technology has also allowed teachers to get creative with their online lessons.

Mr. Hart said he's had some teachers post voice-over lessons or supplementary videos they'd like students to watch outside class. Teachers have also used online discussion threads to get students actively participating outside class time.

"I've even had teachers give essay tests during [snow days]," said Mr. Hart. "There are so many different ways lessons can be put up."

Gibault Catholic High has also seen some unintended benefits from using the technology on snow days.

"We're saving a lot of money," said Mr. Hart. "Because we're not making up the days in May, that's five days we're not sending out buses to pick up students; we're not paying maintenance and janitorial staff those days; heating is much lower than normal; and we're not using all those supplies, like soap and toilet paper, that we would on a normal day."

As good as that option is, though, teachers won't have to worry about finding themselves out of a job.

"Although we love e-learning days, as great as they are for us, it's not as good as having kids here and a teacher in the classroom," said Mr. Hart. "We still need that human element, and that motivating element. We're not ready to be an online school."

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