



As snow days add up, how do schools cope?

By Cheryl Truman and Erin Simon | January 25, 2014

Given Kentucky's recent and continuing battle with the forces of punishing cold, the question on the minds of many is: *With all the snow days being racked up by public schools, how will districts finish before the state's broiling summer begins?*

As of Friday, Fayette County Public Schools had accumulated seven snow days — four of them last week. Students did not attend school Monday for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which meant an entire week out of class.

State law requires that districts provide no less than the equivalent of 177 six-hour instructional days, or 1,062 hours, during the 2013-14 school year. The school calendar is required to include makeup days equal to the greatest number of days missed systemwide in the school district over the preceding five school years.

Districts may structure their provisions for snow days in different ways. They might schedule "early dismissal" days that could later be converted to a full day, giving them a three-hour cushion with which to work. They might also add days off into the scheduled school year that could later be canceled. They can also tack on extra days beyond the planned last day of classes.

Some districts with difficult roads must be more creative with their schedules: In Floyd County, May 8 was targeted as the last day of school, but the calendar allows for school to be extended more than six more weeks, up to June 20, for weather make-up days.

Of the Fayette County district's strategy to schedule for minimal snow day impact, spokeswoman Lisa Deffendall said: "You hope for a good winter, and you hope to let kids out as early as possible."

Nonetheless, she said, weather make-up days are identified when the school calendar is adopted more than a year in advance. For 2013-14, make-up days scheduled so far are April 25, May 29 and 30 and June 2 to 5. As of Friday, June 5 was the last day of school.

June 6 and the week of June 9 to 13 remain on the table as possible additional make-up days, given future weather conditions. (High school graduation dates are not set until early spring after the threat of bad weather has passed and all make-up days have been announced.)

Deffendall said that it's difficult to please everyone. "The perfect school calendar differs for every single person and every single family," she said.

There's also the problem of lack of continuity in the classroom when students are out several days in a row. Glendover Elementary School principal Cathy Fine said that the many snow days raise concerns about lost instructional time.

"The snow days hit us at an awkward time because kids have already been off for winter break and we barely got up and rolling when it hit us again. ... Anytime there is a big break there is always a transitional period when kids have to get back in school thinking mode."

Extracurricular activities also took a hit. The Kentucky High School Journalism Association was expecting 18 schools and 300 students and teachers to attend its meeting this week at Lexington's Hyatt Regency Hotel. Then, the cold weather bludgeoned the state.

David Greer, administrator of the association, said that the convention wound up with nine schools and 135 students. "Our attendance took a big hit, though I certainly understand why they could not go," Greer said.

Statewide, there is a provision for districts to apply for "disaster days" with the state commissioner of education — but only after the district has scheduled to make up at least the first 20 days missed.