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South Middle School longtime staffer Dale Cole shovels snow Tuesday morning near the cafeteria at South before students start arriving. As the snow accumulated, USD No. 480 administrators made the decision to let students out early and closed school at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday. The decision was also made late Tuesday afternoon to close school for Wednesday as well. L&T photo/Earl Watt

Winter storm keeps school officials up all night

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Weather forecasters can predict blizzards or bad driving conditions, but that doesn't mean it's easy for school district employees to decide whether or not to cancel classes.

USD No. 480 public relations director Jason McAfee said the attempt to hold school Tuesday,

despite predictions of snow, was unavoidable. While school districts, colleges and businesses across the state closed because of the storm, students in Liberal were expected to attend classes.

Meanwhile, school was cancelled Tuesday in Dodge City, Garden City, Hugoton and Elkhart, where no snow had yet fallen by Tuesday morning.

As snow continued to pile up to a depth of about five inches or more in Liberal, USD 480 decided to dismiss students early, at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday. All district activities, including basketball games with visiting team Dodge City, were postponed until a later date. USD 480 also cancelled school for Wednesday, announcing that decision late Tuesday evening.

McAfee said the arrival time of the snowstorm determined everything else.

“Ultimately, our superintendent of schools, Mr. Paul Larkin, makes the decision with input from board members and other staff,” McAfee said. “We talked about what to do Monday night, and he said, ‘Be alert, sleep with your phone by your bed.’”

Larkin arose at 3:30 a.m., and again at 5 a.m. to check the weather conditions and snowfall. McAfee, too, got up at 5 a.m. Tuesday.

“At that point, it didn’t look any different than when we all went to sleep,” McAfee said. “When it’s early morning like that, we’re kind of up against a deadline at a certain point. We want to give parents and bus drivers and everyone enough time to react.”

To illustrate what the district doesn’t want, McAfee described a situation a few years ago, when USD 480 made the decision at 7:15 a.m. to cancel school.

“That was really too late,” McAfee said. “Kids were already there, or on the way to school. Some of their parents had dropped them off and gone to work for the the day, and the children didn’t

have any way to get home.”

Given the bad weather conditions, principals and teachers were unwilling to send students home on foot.

“It was a mess,” McAfee said, recalling long delays, anxious children and frustrated parents. “We don’t want that kind of situation to exist.”

By giving parents a two-hour lead time, McAfee said, the district enabled them to make arrangements for work, child care and transportation. That is exactly what happened Tuesday, when official notices went out around 11 a.m., giving families ample time to decide how to retrieve their students from school at 1:30 p.m.

After students headed home early Tuesday afternoon, staff at the district’s Central Office finished a regular workday. McAfee said an end-of-the-day meeting was already set to decide the next day’s plan.

“We’ll make an announcement Tuesday evening, I hope,” he said. “Or, we might have to get up again at 4 a.m. to see how things look.”

As it turned out, Larkin and his team decided on a snow day for Wednesday. To notify parents, McAfee sent out automated messages by phone, text and email using information provided by parents during student enrollment earlier this year.

“Once we have a decision, it takes about 15 minutes to prepare the notices” in English and Spanish, he said. “We get the translators to make sure we’re not saying something we don’t intend in Spanish, and once I hit ‘send,’ it takes 30 or 40 minutes to get out to everyone.”

Sure enough, parents began to receive phone calls right around dinner time Tuesday. Wednesday is officially a snow day. The district will go through the decision-making process

How does USD 480 determine a SNOW DAY?

Wednesday, 05 February 2014 11:01

again before Thursday, but unless more stormy weather blows in, it's expected that USD 480 will resume, just in time for parent-teacher conferences.

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