

From the desk of Stefan Czaporowski, Superintendent of Westfield Schools

Over the last nine years, Westfield Schools have had an average of five and a half days of school cancelled each year with most cancellations due to inclement weather. And as most of us know, we create the School Calendar with five weather emergency days and each cancellation adds another day of school in June. In the 2016 - 2017, there were a total of eight weather related cancellations, which meant the school year was extended until June 28.

Westfield Public Schools understands that student learning doesn't have to be contained within the four walls of a classroom, and we also know that cancellations cause a loss in momentum for learning. Conversely, the make-up days that are added to the June calendar prolong the year are not as productive, due in large part to some overheated classrooms. For these reasons, Westfield Public Schools is considering the use of alternative structured learning days that would allow our students to have fewer breaks in instruction and learning, and still complete the school year in mid-June.

Alternative structured learning days, or "Blizzard Bag Days", refers to the practice of assigning students work that can be completed at home on days when school is not in session because of weather or other emergencies. The assignments completed over the course of the year on days that school is canceled would replace the make-up days traditionally added to the School Calendar in the month of June. Several states have adopted this program, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has collaborated with Burlington Public Schools to pilot Blizzard Bags in that district. Also, more locally, the Gateway Regional School District adopted Blizzard Bags for the 2016 - 2017 school year, and reported a successful implementation.

Westfield Public Schools is in the process of developing a similar plan that meets the DESE requirements for time on learning. If this proposal is adopted, a maximum of five school cancellation days will be designated as "Blizzard Bag Days." The design for Blizzard Bags will include a series of linked assignments that are part of an ongoing, longer term project that would need to be completed by the end of May. We will also recommend a one-year pilot program that allows our schools to both pilot these days and to gather feedback from students, parents, and staff. We believe that Blizzard Bag Days provide the opportunity for the integration of project-based learning and online education into our regular instruction. Blizzard Bag Days also allow for the continuous engagement of students, and gives them the opportunity to practice time management skills and experience self-directed academic pursuits that are becoming such an integral part of both the college and career experience.

Because we started school before Labor Day this year, our last day of school will be June 14 if there are no weather-related cancellations. However, we live in New England where snow and ice are a reality. Utilizing Blizzard Bag Days will allow us to finish the year on June 14 even if we have five days of weather related cancellations. We are still developing our alternative structured day proposal and we have challenges in several areas to address with stakeholder groups to ensure that the best plan is put forward. We intend to share the plan at an upcoming October School Committee meeting. Stay tuned!