

Q & A - PWSD Buses and School Operation during Inclement Weather

Background:

Student safety is a priority for Peace Wapiti School Division. Our inclement weather policy is intended to provide guidance to limit exposure to situations where student safety is at risk. Transportation is a significant service – our bus service plays an important part in the daily lives of our parents and students. Consequently, we take the decision to withhold transportation services very seriously. We work to assure the safety of students in our care and take precautions to limit exposure to extreme weather conditions; however, it is not possible for us to deal with all of the variables that our students encounter prior to getting on the bus. It is necessary that parents ultimately make the decision whether it is safe enough to have their child walk to school or to meet the bus. Our [inclement weather policy](#) helps guide these decisions for school administrators and for parents.

What is Peace Wapiti's current guideline for bus closure?

If the temperature is -40 degrees Celsius or colder at 6 a.m. at a Key Weather Station Location (see [chart](#)) the Superintendent will cancel school buses in that high school attendance area. (Note: wind chill factor is not considered.)

Who makes the decision to close a bus route?

If temperatures drop below -40 degrees Celsius in an attendance area or if road conditions warrant, the Superintendent delegates the responsibility to the Director of Transportation to shut down either the whole District or all routes within one of the high school attendance areas. In addition, when the road conditions warrant drivers may shut down their routes if, after making a reasonable attempt, they feel it is unsafe to travel. Finally, parents may choose not to place their students on the bus if they feel it is unsafe.

Why do parents have to decide? Why can't the system make the decision for them?

Peace Wapiti is a large district with a number of unique situations. Safety is always a priority but differences in pick up locations, route lengths and the age of the children must be recognized. Parents need to retain the right to make the final decision in accordance with their own unique situation. For example, given the same weather conditions, parents of an older student with a short bus ride may feel comfortable placing their child on a bus. Those same parents living at the end of a long route with a younger child may decide, for very good reasons, not to place their child on the bus. Likewise the length of walk for a student from the residence to the bus pick up may influence a parents' decision. Parents may also need to take into consideration the requirements of their employment and availability of childcare for younger children.

Why do we not base it around elementary school attendance boundaries?

Until recently Peace Wapiti used the Grande Prairie Airport as the "official weather station". However, our large geographic area demonstrated significant variation in temperature and weather conditions. Often bus routes would be cancelled in areas where it was much warmer than -40 degrees Celsius and vice versa. The development of local "Weather Bug" services and local AMA Weather Stations allowed us to divide our system into six areas based on high school attendance boundaries. Because our K-9 and K-8 schools act as transfer points for the high school students, cancelling bus routes at some of the K-9 schools in an area would cause significant disruption to the high school classes. This can impact the time our high school teachers need to meet curriculum objectives, and the high school students' ability to write diploma exams.

Why doesn't Peace Wapiti consider wind chill when deciding to shut down our bus service?

1. In a mild year Peace Wapiti will likely cancel all or a major part of our system two or three times. On an average year, five to seven days of bus service will be cancelled. Last year we cancelled one or more high school attendance areas on eleven different days. According to the Weather Network, each year Grande Prairie has an average of nine days per year where wind chill factor was below -40 degrees Celsius, based on thirty years of historic information from the [Weather Network](#). While some of the nine days would be holidays, the vast majority would be school days. Adding these closure days to the ones which already occur as a result of road issues would create two significant concerns:
 - a. the safety of the children in families where both parents work - schools provides a safe place for our children to be. When we shut down bus service, many working parents drive their children to school. According to the [American National Academy of Sciences-Transportation Research Board](#), children are 13 times safer in a school bus than in other modes of travel. Increasing the number of days when the buses are not running puts these children at greater risk;
 - b. the loss of the necessary instructional time to meet curriculum outcomes. Our curriculums are built around the assumption of a minimum number of instructional hours. (Alberta Education requires 950 hours of instruction for K-9 and 1000 hours for Grades 10-12.) The loss of additional days of instructional hours will impact our ability to provide a competitive education program.
2. Wind chill can have significant impact on children and should be considered when dressing children for the walk to the school bus. Wind chill also becomes less of a factor once children are inside the bus; however, ensuring that children are appropriately dressed for the cold is important. Wind chill has very little impact on the performance of the busses themselves when compared to the wind chill created by driving down the road.

For more information see [Policy EAAF – PWSD Buses and School Operation during Inclement Weather](#)