

BETHANY PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT
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Superintendent of Schools

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November 29, 2011

Dear Parents/Guardians and Staff,

This fall we have experienced the debilitating effects of significant storms Irene and Alfred. In the case of storm Alfred, both the storm and the effects were unprecedented in Connecticut. These events brought to light the limitations of our facility and of our communications systems. Each year the BOWA Superintendents issue a "Winter Advisory" and I am sure that many of you read the most recent edition when it was published in the local papers a short time ago. Given the information regarding the limitations and weaknesses in our communication systems that emerged during the power outage resulting from storm Alfred, I am writing to reinforce the message contained in the "Winter Advisory" but also to expand upon the message, specifically as it relates to Bethany.

Our primary vehicles for disseminating information regarding school closings, delays or early dismissals are the local media outlets. School delay and closing information will be broadcast by 5:30 a.m. at the latest on WTNH Channel 8, www.wtnh.com, WVIT Channel 30 NBC Connecticut www.nbcconnecticut.com, and new this year on Fox CT www.CTnow.com. Early dismissal will be broadcast between 10:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. on those same stations. The decisions regarding delays, dismissals or closings also will be logged on to www.ctweather.com which allows a customized message but is only accessible as a web-based service with no call in option and therefore less available during a power outage. Each of these media outlets provides a free service so that individuals can sign up to receive notifications via text message or email. I urge you all to take advantage of at least one of these services.

Although we will continue to use our eNotify system to announce school closings, delays and early dismissals, that system is not available to us when there is no power at the school. In 1998 when the most recent school renovation was completed, the server room was not wired into the backup generator. The listserv for parents, staff and others who are enrolled in eNotify is housed on one of the servers. Of course in 1998 the use of technology in communications of this nature was not as pervasive, many people did not have email accounts, Google did not exist and the words face and book were not combined to imply a form of communication and social networking. Never the less we are exploring options that might allow us to maintain at least some form of communication via eNotify in the event of a power outage. Even the local media outlets noted above experienced problems with their systems causing reporting errors during the aftermath of storm Alfred. They are usually very reliable and rarely report incorrect information. The messages for school delays, cancellations, or early dismissals are contained in a fixed and pre-determined menu developed by each media organization. It is difficult to arrange for a custom message with most and not possible at all with some. We are exploring more flexibility in reporting with the media outlets and one in particular, NBC 30 has added new options to its menu to allow the message to contain a specific day of the week. That will be helpful. One of the problems we encountered during Alfred is that the reporting systems all anticipate that the message selected is for that day specifically and usually there is not an option to add a message for the following day or for a longer period of time. In addition they all reset messages at a specific time so even early notifications designed to inform parents or staff of the school's status for the next day are often deleted and must be reposted.

Hopefully the other media outlets will agree to follow the lead of NBC 30 and provide more flexible options. NBC 30 has also provided a new option for Superintendents to access the web-based notification system via Smartphone. That would have been a great option for me personally since power at my home was not reconnected until after most of Bethany residents already had power restored.

We are exploring other options for enhanced communication capabilities. One suggestion is to create a Facebook page for Bethany Community School that can be updated with information such as school closings and can push out notifications via text alerts or emails similar to the Facebook pages of other groups or organizations. There are pros and cons to this option and we are exploring those in depth. One of the issues with a Facebook page for BCS is that Facebook itself as well as other social media sites is blocked by our filtering system, one that is connected through the Connecticut Education Network. We have some flexibility in that area but not much. Another idea is to use a system such as the Town's Code Red. Some of you may remember that we did in fact implement the Honeywell Instant Alert System a number of years ago. We enrolled all families at the outset but as with other systems of this nature, participants can opt out. Ultimately we found that 60% of our families opted out of the system. Clearly that did not provide for an effective notification system and we discontinued the use of the Instant Alert System about three years ago. We can explore this type of system again but it seems that we can achieve almost the same outcome if parents sign up for the free text or email alerts from one or more of the major media outlets discussed above.

I am hopeful that we will not have to experience another extended power outage in the near future, however, with winter upon us and minimal repairs completed to power lines state-wide it remains a possibility. We will continue to explore options for enhanced communications given the limitations of our present systems. In the mean time I urge you again to avail yourselves of the text or email services offered by the media outlets as these are more likely to continue to be available during any extended power outage.

The last item to be discussed is the revised school calendar that accompanies this letter. The calendar has been revised to include the days that have already been "made up" and potential make up days have been marked as such. Please note that school will be in session on March 30th but it is now scheduled as an early release day for students. We will continue to monitor the effect on the calendar of any new weather related events as we move further into winter.

Sincerely,

Timothy F. Connellan

Timothy F. Connellan, Superintendent