Inclement Weather Decision Making Process Outlined

New Hanover County Schools is aware of the implications of opening school during less than perfect conditions and of delaying or closing schools when poor weather conditions exist or are predicted. The school system understands that its students are better served—both academically and socially-by being in school. On the other hand, the school system considers the safety of students its primary responsibility. Therefore, we reserve the right to close schools or modify start and closing times.

NHCS students and staff members typically travel to school in five ways. Some are driven on school buses, some walk to schools or bus stops, some are driven by their parents, some drive themselves, and some are driven by other students. When the school system considers the impact of weather conditions on the ability to open schools, it considers all these methods of transportation. In fact, because school bus transportation is by far the safest form of transportation, decisions to delay or close schools are rarely made because of concern over school bus transportation. NHCS thinks about teenagers who drive to high schools in the early morning hours before it is light. It thinks about students who walk and about students waiting at bus stops. The school system thinks about the many students who attend schools or programs that are long distances from their homes.

Because some schools open as early as 7:15 a.m., and because many students drive or are driven long distances to their schools, NHCS school buses begin their runs before 6 a.m. By 6 a.m., NHCS students are on buses, at bus stops waiting for buses, or still at home after their parents have left for work. Experience tells school officials that the absolute worst thing the school system can do is to unexpectedly return students home without parents knowing that this is happening. Occasionally weather conditions worsen quickly thus requiring a later decision. Parents need to be aware of this possibility and plan accordingly. The safety of our students, staff, and parents remains our primary consideration.

Many staff members, such as bus drivers, leave home well before 5 a.m. Many parents need time to last-minute arrangements for child care. Accordingly, the school system makes every effort to make decisions to delay opening or to not open schools by 11:00 p.m. the night before. Once a decision is made by the Superintendent, it takes approximately 45 minutes to complete notifying local media and updating the school system web page, the school system television channel and AlertNow.

If the school system is lucky, weather events occur in ways and times that make it easy to decide to open, delay, or close. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In many cases, snow, sleet, or freezing rain doesn't start until between 5 a.m. and 8 a.m. Often, the school system has to base its decisions on weather forecasts. This sometimes results in schools opening when the conditions are worse than anticipated and in schools closing on days when the weather ends up being not all that bad. On some occasions, the school system has been able to make a scheduling decision the day before so that parents, staff members, and students know what will happen the following day. This usually happens when precipitation is already on the ground and the temperatures are such that the precipitation on the ground is frozen or will refreeze.

NHCS prefers to avoid making decisions based on forecasts. When weather events are actually occurring, or have occurred, the school system gathers information from many sources. NHCS administrators participate in regional conference calls that include representatives from the National Weather Service, NHC Sheriff's Office, Wilmington Police Department and NC Highway Patrol. The school system consults with these agencies to get road condition information from different parts of the county. School bus transportation staff members drive into neighborhoods and around schools to obtain firsthand information on current conditions. Finally, school officials consult with other school systems in the region to share information.

Once all this information is gained, the Superintendent is called and briefed. He makes the final decision.

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Those administrators who help make the decisions know that often no perfect decision exists. What many parents, staff members, and students think about NHCS opening and closing decisions often is influenced by where they live, how they commute, what their child care situation is, and many other factors.

The school system hopes that this explanation helps everyone understand the process and the steps administrators take to help the Superintendent make the best possible decisions. When everything is said and done, however, each parent should be prepared to make the best decision for his or her own child.