

For Students, Parents and Teachers in Chesterfield Schools

It's Only

15 Minutes... or is it?

By Melissa Wilfong

We all know that there was a lot of snow in the area this winter, none of which can be completely planned for or avoided. Mother Nature is a hard task master and Chesterfield County is no exception to the wrath of snow during the winters here.

When February brought more than one snowstorm to the county, many parents immediately began to wonder how much school would be missed and how it would impact the school schedules in the county.

a huge one. Many parents have their children or students in some sort of afterschool activity. Whether that is a job for older students or an afterschool church program, these are activities that should've been considered when the schedule was changed without input from parents.

Think of the dance groups, karate, church programs, after-school jobs, athletic programs such as soccer, basketball, or baseball or community programs that parents

the changes were really necessary, if they would be willing to reimburse lost costs parent's incurred because their children couldn't attend their activities, and if parent removed the children at normal hours would they be penalized.

She said she was surprised at the answers. "I got no answer at all to my question about the money spent on my daughter's afterschool activity, Driskell said. "But I was more surprised at the handling of the situation."

She emphasized that if she took her daughter out of school 15 minutes early during this time that after three days of these early releases, her daughter would be considered absent from school one day. She would be subject to a letter of reprimand concerning the time if they exceeded the prescribed limits, which they would have.

"I just don't think that was handled well," Driskell added. "We just need a better communication plan, one that makes sense and has input from parents." Driskell received a reply from Tim Bullis, director of Community Relations where he relayed that "the decision to add 15 minutes a day for two months

was not made in order to meet minimum state requirements; time is needed to teach the required Standard of Learning, and each school division is required to certify through the Standards of Quality report."

Parents just feel that they were dismissed with a high-handedness that denotes a lack of good working relationships. Driskell said, "It just wasn't handled well and they were very dismissive without compassion."

Instead Driskell's daughter rushed from her elementary school and dressed into her swimsuit, in the car, as they travelled to swim practice, and they were still late. Various directors of after school programs encouraged parents to let the county know that this just didn't work.

Imagine this scenario played out at karate studios, dance studios, soccer teams, baseball practices, and jobs all over the

county. Was this well thought out? Was it the only solution?

The 15 minutes added to the day amounted to three and a half minutes on a block schedule for each subject. So three and a half minutes added to each class was enough time to meet the SOL standards? Even the time for the two months only recoups 16 of the more than 50 teaching hours missed for the year.

Another swim practice mother, Monique McGovern, really questions whether it was beneficial at all.

"We know they are trying here but is this the best that Chesterfield County can do?" she questions. "I just feel there had to be another solution because this didn't give the kids more time to do homework or anything productive; it only gave Chesterfield County more accountability time to the SOLs and maybe kept them from losing funds."

She feels it probably cost teachers that 15 minutes just to restructure their days to coordinate the few extra moments in their classrooms. McGovern had to really juggle to get her son to swim practice. "We just had to be late, there was no other choice," she said. McGovern felt the school's attitude was one of "sorry we're doing this and this is the way it is."

Comments on Facebook were mixed in reaction. Both McGovern and Driskell would rather have added a day to the end of the year than go through this juggling act.

"Parents want to be good partners with their schools so they are always juggling their children's activities with homework and them having a life outside of their education. We believe Chesterfield County could've done a much better job of keeping us in the loop and not springing the change on us so unexpectedly; there should've been more discussion."

The additional time is almost halfway to the point now, but the real lesson to be learned here is how to treat the parental partners in schools and what about next time? In a community with such active and responsive parents, shouldn't that cooperative relationship be considered and appreciated? Invariably there will be a next time. There's too many snow days. And How will it be handled next time? That's the real concern raised by parents and students alike.



After missing 10-plus days, Chesterfield County Public Schools (CCPS) released information on their plans to make up the educational time.

A release on Facebook regarding the snow included "Chesterfield County is eliminating three-hour release days for Feb. 25 and March 25 (these will be full instructional days) and CCPS would also add 15 minutes to the end of the school day from March 2 through April 30."

Is the real problem that Chesterfield County doesn't have any snow days built-in to the annual school calendar? Most folks agree that they used to have time built-in to the school year and are not sure that it is prudent not to have some time allotted for snow since Virginia seems to get more snow than they did in the past.

The impact to students and parents was

have their children scheduled for.

Melanie Driskell is one such parent. Her daughter is scheduled right after school to go to swim team practice at the local YMCA. She leaves school at 3:45 p.m. and gets to the YMCA in just enough time for her daughter to change into her swimsuit and be at practice. Driskell works and adjusts her schedule to get her daughter to the activities. She also says to have her daughter in these activities.

"We act as responsible parents, we have a sort of contract with the schools," she explained. "We provide for our children and we try to do our part as parents and we expect the same from our schools."

Driskell feels there was not enough notice nor enough input from parents. "I felt that it was dismissive and wasn't personable at all, just not handled well."

Driskell wrote to CCPS and asked if