

P [Proseus] Alright, so, first of all, thank you. I'm with Superintendent David Stephens, Dr. David Stephens now, from the Bartlett City School District, and I appreciate you taking a few minutes to talk a little bit about how the school district operates in winter weather, and also I'd be remiss if I didn't congratulate you on being Tennessee Superintendent of the Year this year.

S [Stephens] Thank you, Erik, appreciate it. Happy to sit down and chat for a few minutes.

P Excellent. Can you start with just giving me a little bit of the background of the district? How many schools, how many students do you serve, and staff and so forth.

S Yeah. Bartlett has 11 schools, six elementary, three middle schools, one ninth grade academy, and Bartlett High School. We have approximately 87 hundred students and about 850 staff members, so fairly large district. In fact, as far as the municipal and city districts in the state, we are the largest of city and municipal. You have a lot of county, some county districts, and I believe we're around number 20 as you look at size of school districts across the state so, pretty large, pretty large school district.

P Good, so you've got definitely a lot of folks that are concerned about how the decisions are made and I'm sure providing you feedback on how those decisions are made and stuff good too, so that's good. So we're going to talk a little bit today about how winter weather affects a southern school system, and obviously that's much different than, you know, those up north who laugh at us when we have an inch of snow in the forecast and everything goes crazy. But I guess it's said with probably some truth that southerners really don't handle snow and ice well, and for good reason, really, you know, couple things. First we don't have a lot of practice with it, so even when you do put together a plan and you get to exercise it, you don't get to exercise it again with your best practices a week later, so that's certainly one thing, and then as we all know, and for those that have read the blog and so forth before, know winter weather is a challenging meteorological question as well. You know, there's a lot of different things that go into that and it makes it a very difficult problem and so I imagine the end results, you know, how much snow, how much ice, timing, temperature, all plays into operational decisions as well because it affects kind of how things work. So all that said, I know you don't just throw your hands up and hope it all magically works, so I would like to talk a little bit about the process, I guess, starting early on. So let's go back to say the beginning of the school year, or how far, I guess, maybe the question is how far or how early do you start to think about what are our plans going to be for this year in case of inclement weather?

S Well I think we probably, once we get school up and running and we get into the end of September, end of October, we start having discussions and we start talking about one our communication plan, how we're going to do that. We look at what we've done in the past, and usually at the end of the snow season, we kind of sit down and see what works and what doesn't as far as who's going to be out on the streets and at what time and at what time is our notifications, because and then we kind of look at that back in the fall to make sure that we have our timelines and we know when those things are going to happen. And like you said, you know, one of the big, you know, we have over, during each school start time, you know, we have over 50 school buses that are out on the roads and, you know, you say that the situation, then you have young drivers, you know, 16, 17 year old kids, and they don't have that experience, and

then, you know, the snow removal equipment, you know. And the City of Bartlett does a phenomenal job. You know, they'll come through and put, put down, treat our parking lots and come through, and I've even seen one snowplow that can kind of plow some of that, but usually we don't have the

P You don't have

S enough snow.

P Yeah. But they do take care of your school property.

S Yeah, they'll come down, they'll come down and try to hit our parking lots and do that, and you know, they, they work through, you know, discussions we've had with the Mayor, like this past snow event. We, all of our schools were closed but we had a high school basketball tournament and we had four teams from out of state that had flown in to play that night, so you know, we were up here, myself included, with backpack blowers, cause early that morning, we could blow that snow off the sidewalks.

P Sure, which is unusual for this part of the country.

S It was very unusual, and we were, you know, getting that ready and the City came through and hit a couple of the parking lots and so we were, cause we hated those teams that had flown in for this tournament to have to cancel that, so, but yeah, it's something that we look at our planning, we re-evaluate it at the end of the year, and then we kind of sit back at the beginning of cold weather season, cause you just never know, you can be 70 one day and have snow two days later.

P Exactly, or the opposite as we're doing this week. And just so that those that are listening know, this is recorded Tuesday morning, January 10th, where we had just a snow day on January 6th, the Friday, created a three-day weekend and I know a lot of kids appreciate it, and will be 70 tomorrow, so it does, it certainly does happen. So as, say we're looking at, you know, one potential event, say, you know, for example, last week, as you were leading up to that. As that winter weather event approaches, you're kind of out of the strategic planning and you're kind of, you know, getting into the tactical planning, how are we going to deal with this event.

S Right.

P What sort of sources are you using for your information and are you consulting with other districts as you're making these decisions or ...

S Yeah, there's a lot of communication. What I do is I constantly watch the weather. Fortunately, I'm kind of a weather nut. I've got a lot, if you looked at my computer, you'd see different, different web sites and different groups, and you know, when I start looking out, I always look at those 10, and sometimes I'll even look after those 15 day forecasts just to see, you know, moisture and temperature and looking at that. You know, but I'll say, you know, Erik, and I'm not saying this in a gratuitous way, but the work you've done and the relationship we've

been able to have where I can reach out to you and you can reach out to me with MemphisWeather.net has been extremely helpful.

P Thank you.

S In fact, some of my, in fact, I was talking to one of my superintendent colleagues and said that we were going to talk today, and he said, well thanks, Erik, for the, for the text that, you know, cause I'll take that text and send it to on to some of my colleagues, cause we're getting it from a lot of different sources. The thing I've seen about what you do is, when I look at the, the Weather Channel, that's pretty global, you know, when I have that, that information here. I think they're kind of looking at a larger, even the National Weather Service, and I do enjoy the National Weather Service site and we will get on their conference calls with National Weather Service, but their forecast discussion. I think it's, it's more technical, I like that they put a lot of words in blue and I can click and see what the, the

P Find out the definition, what that means.

S name and those different models and how that's working. But we start looking at that and we start having discussions. Then as superintendents, in fact, you know, I was on the phone, Thursday night I look up, you know, Dorsey Hopson from Shelby County sends a text and says, hey, what are you guys hearing, so we talk and we talk with the other municipal superintendents and we're texting. So leading up to that, we're having conversations because, you know, it's kind of the domino. Once one district goes, then the heightened sense of, all right, what are you going to do? So we try to coordinate and, and it just, it may not be the same because you can have a situation where Bartlett may be doing pretty good on the little bit more of the central northern end of the county, but down in Collierville-Germantown, they may be the ones getting those, those issues, so it's not always that we're going to be the same, but we do try to coordinate and have discussions. So leading up to that event, there's, there's still conversation we're looking at it, and then once we get into that 24-hour period, then we're kind of

P You can make your own decision based on your specific circumstance.

S And you know, and how we do that decision is we talk to our team and we have a group of three of us that get out and drive the streets of Bartlett, and what we do is we're up to 3:30 a.m. We get out, we look at the conditions around our house, we contact the Bartlett group, then we get out in our cars and go, so I was at, at 3:45, I was coming down Stage Road with snow flurries. I live over near the Altruria area and by the time I got to, I took it all the way down to Covington Pike and Stage, we were starting to get snow on the streets, so then I called, so then I touched base with some of the other superintendents to see what are you seeing around, you know, because like for Collierville, we're a little bit more on the western end, so he wants to know, you know, what's happening down kind of in that end. I said, well, we're getting it there, how are things looking on your end of the town? Then we'll pull over in parking lots and I will meet with our staff, but you know, we, we are out on the roads. It's something that I take very serious, because the thing we always want to do is we want to, if we're going to err, we're going to err on the side of caution. We do not want to put any student, staff member, parent, anybody at any, any risk. We, we, if there's a way we can be in school, we want to be in school, but we

have to, to look at that, so, so we, we have conversations, and then as we look at this by 4:00, between 4:30 and 5:00, we have to make that call because buses, buses are going to start rolling. The bus drivers appreciate as early as we can let them know so we're not getting them out on the roads, so, so we're, you know, usually by, if we haven't, by 5:00, we have to make that, and then the fear you always have is that once the snow hasn't started, and if it starts around 6:00 or 7:00, because for us to call school off during the day, it's a three-hour process.

P Okay. I was going to ask about that, too, about early dismissals and late starts versus just calling off the day.

S Yeah, it's, it's a, because what we have is we have a fleet of buses and they run three tiers. That's how we're able to economize and save, you know, people always wonder, well why are we, why don't we have one start time? Well we would have to triple the number of buses and it would be, you know, a big, big investment. So it's always best if, and too, from a parent perspective. You know, if, the sooner we can let them know, I mean, perfectly, we'd let them know the night before. It's hard to do that based on a forecast because, as we know, at times, it's difficult.

P It does change. Yeah.

S It's difficult. But parents have to make, we understand they have young, young children and they have to make arrangements, so we want to let them know as soon as possible, but once we're in school, let's say it's 9:00 and the snow's coming down, we have to dismiss. Well then our 7:00 schools, our schools that dismiss at 2:00, we would have to start those from 9:00 to 10:00, then your middle tier schools, 10:00 to 11:00, 11:00 to 12:00, so you've got a three-hour period where you're running those buses and that's a, that's a tough, tough situation to be in, so it's always best to call it. And you know, in the criteria we do is we look at the condition of the roads, what are the forecast, I'm constantly looking at the radar. You know, sometimes we're always concerned about the bluff effect, some people will say that the snow will split. Back when I was a student and a kid in school, and even when I was a teacher, we always wanted a snow day. When you're superintendent, you don't want snow days. I used to love snow. Now it's like, no, I do not want snow. But you know, we're constantly looking at the radar, we're looking at what the forecasts are saying, what's coming in, what's actually on the roads, so you know, there's sometimes we may have to make a call based on, you know, what that forecast is saying, and that's one where sometimes you can definitely get, we all get second guessed in those decisions, but again, we want to err on the side of caution.

P Okay, good. Let's see. So we talked a little bit about some of the delayed opening, early close, closing early, that that's just a challenge because the time that it takes

S Yeah, you know, the delay opening, we, we've had those discussions and some things we even said. You know, well let's say if there's a winter storm warning, then that's automatically going to be a two-hour delay to give us more time and just, you know, I think sometimes the delays can cause as much angst for the parents because now they're juggling, and teachers, being able to get that communication out. Now we're very fortunate, we have a phone system that will send a text, it will send a phone call to all our parents, and it can send an email, and then we can

post our web site. And our local media does a good job of, of getting that message out. We have one person that is our contact, Jason Sykes, who's our comms guy, his job is to get that, once we've made that call, then he gets those statements out. Joey Mitchell in our technology department, he's getting out our rapid notice system, so

P They're working in tandem to get that message out.

S It was good. We sent, there was an email that we sent yesterday and it was, you know how did things go? Were there things we need to do? And then we can, you know, but we felt that things went pretty smooth this time. Luckily, the snow was coming down early enough.

P Right. Yeah, and that makes a lot of difference. If you go out on the road and there's a little snow on it, you kind of have your decision made for you.

S That's right. When I can't see the lane lines, it's like I'm not going to put buses and kids out in this.

P Right. And, and I can tell you from being a parent of two Bartlett City School kids, that all of those notices came out, you know, we got it on text, we got the phone call. The email came out, Twitter message went out at the same time. You know, my kids are getting it on their, on their...

S It's funny. The kids know before anybody else. It's interesting. I have a daughter, last year my son was a senior, and usually the night, after we've had a snow, like last year we had snow, and the next day everybody's wanting to know. My poor kid's phone is just blowing up. You know, "what's your dad going to do?" Tell him not to have school tomorrow. So sometimes I will get them in the car and say, all right, you're going to drive with me, we're going to go look at these roads.

P That's actually a really good plan. And I can tell you that my daughter's phone is also blowing up, with "what does your dad say it's going to do?" So we're both in the same position there. Great. So when you make these decisions that you make, say to call off school, besides the other districts that you're talking to and certainly your internal staff, are you speaking with anybody else, say with the City, the Mayor's office, Public Works, police, fire, any of those?

S Yeah, we, we talk to the Mayor, we, we let them know. In fact, that morning at 4:30, get a text from the Mayor, "what are your thoughts?" So I called him real quick cause I was at a point, and I won't drive and text, so I just gave him a quick call, and said Mayor, it looks like that we're getting pretty close to calling that. Then we have to decide, well what are we going to do with our 12-month employees? So what we did originally with this event is we said, we'll have a 10:00 a.m. start time. Well then as I was on the roads at 6:30, 7:00, they were much worse than they were at 5:30. In fact, I was coming up Stage at the railroad tracks and I was stopped at the red light. When I went, just getting up that little bit of hill with my front wheel drive car, and so I said, well, you know, we've had, you know, in the past, we don't want employees to slip, we don't want employees to have an accident, so that gives us a little bit more time up there, but our maintenance staff, they did come in, so we have some folks that are

considered mission critical, so we had those come in, so we try to, try to look at that and, and if our, if we feel that by 10:00 it's going to be safe to get those folks in, then we try to get those folks in.

P Gotcha, okay. So snow days then as far as the academic calendar is concerned. I would assume that you, you don't really consider the academic calendar on, you're going on safety of the kids and everything when you're calling that. How does Bartlett work, and I know you can't speak for the other districts, but I'm sure you're aware of how their calendars work. Do the days have to be made up? At what point do they have to be made up?

S We do go some extra time so it's able to, for us to stockpile a few snow days. And then at the end of the year, what our Board, I have to make a recommendation to the Board and it's, and it's a Board decision. Do we extend the school year by a day or two, or do we say, let's use those stockpiled day, days to do that? And some of the problems, you know, if you miss a big chunk of, you know, if we're out two weeks, then we're going to, that's a lot of instruction. But two or three days, if you look at adding that in to let's say, you know, after Memorial Day, you really think at that point how much instruction were, you know, but you know, if we do miss that big chunk, so, so we try to look at it and see where that falls in and, and try to weigh that against, you know, so many parents have plans and we've tried to get our calendars out now two years in advance, so a lot of parents have plans and we look at that, so we always do let them know that there is a, there is a chance, though, that that. I never plan a vacation the first week in June because you just, you just never know if we're out for a long, extended period of time.

P Okay, good. Couple other just kind of wrap-up questions then here, so I imagine that, you know, with all of the social media and everything, and obviously you're using that as a communication vehicle and stuff too, it is two-way, and so I know that you're hearing from people, good or bad, you know, on, on how the decisions work and, and all of that. So does that, does that make those decisions any more challenging or are you just going to deal with, you know, the aftermath the way it falls?

S Well, we do. We just have to deal with the facts. And at the end of the day, you have to be able to look yourself in the mirror and say, we've made the best decision for our kids and our community and our parents. And that, you know, that's, that's, it's, it's difficult and, you know, we want kids in school. You know, we want those, those things that are happening in these classrooms to happen, but you know, if I ever put a kid in a situation where somebody was hurt, anything like that, that's just, you know, that's, that's a superintendent's nightmare. So again, I just, at the end of the day, we have to make the best decision and go with that.

P Okay. And finally, just kind of to give you a chance to wrap it up here, so what is it that, you know, with, with 850 staff that you've got, the almost 9 thousand kids and all their parents out there, what do you want them to know, kind of bottom line, about the decisions you make regarding inclement weather and operations in schools, what's your bottom line?

S Well, we're, we're gathering a lot of information, and again, my number one go-to is MemphisWeather.net, you know, Erik, you know, for the last two or three years, you've always, I've text you, hey, how's this looking, and you've been really great to send back and say, here's

how the forecast, but we're gathering a lot of information. We're talking to other districts, we're looking at those forecasts, and we are going to make the best decision to keep our kids safe. I mean, that is the bottom line. Like you say, we just don't have the experience of driving on snow, we don't have the equipment to, to mitigate snow, so we're going to make that decision and sometimes we're going to get it right, but if we're going to miss it, we're going to miss it on the side of caution.

P Excellent, excellent. Well thank you again this morning. I appreciate the time that you've given me.

S Thank you. It's always good to visit with you. Appreciate it.