Schools test 'cyber days' to keep school 'open' during severe weather

By Dwain Hebda of Catholic News and Catholic Review Staff
Catholic schools in Arkansas and other parts of the country have been implementing "cyber days" to ensure that students continue to learn even in the face of inclement weather.

At The John Carroll School in Bel Air, students began implementing cyber days in mid-February after the school was facing its ninth and 10th days of closure due to implement weather. Each of the students at the Harford County school has a laptop, so they are able to receive and complete assignments from teachers.

"The sporadic nature of snow days this year has caused tremendous problems of consistency in learning," said Madelyn Ball, John Carroll's principal.

Cyber day assignments are equal to the actual instructional time in a typical seven-period day, Ball noted.

"Every teacher is required to post assignments that last 30-45 minutes, and they must hold students accountable for completing them," Ball said. "They cyber days are guaranteeing us that learning is going on during snow days and that students are being held accountable for that learning."

Catholic schools in Arkansas have been using a pilot program that, if endorsed by its accrediting body, will dramatically change the way inclement weather days are handled in the future.

"Cyber days" combine online educational tools with teacher planning and creativity to help students make the most of days where inclement weather forces cancellation of the regular school day.

Vernell Bowen, superintendent of schools in the Little Rock Diocese, said the 12 Catholic elementary, middle and high schools in central and eastern Arkansas that implemented either one, two to three cyber days this year have provided their collective feedback for consideration by the board of the Arkansas Nonpublic Accrediting Association in April.

"'Cyber days' is something that the board has discussed for more than a year," Bowen said. "I can't predict how the board will vote, but I think cyber days are potentially a good option for our schools, once the board agrees on specific standards and guidelines to maintain accreditation."

The use of cyber days became even more urgent this winter because no snow days were built into the school calendar. Bowen said three snow days will be included in

2014-2015 calendar, which may convert to cyber days depending on the decision of the accrediting board.

Bowen said the cyber-day option is preferred over tacking on days at the end of the school year or taking away a scheduled holiday like Presidents Day, which have been the traditional ways to handle it.

"The last two or three days of the school year are not what I would call the full teaching experience as it is," Bowen told the Arkansas Catholic, the diocesan newspaper. "Typically, there's a lot of cleanup, paperwork and special activities."

Maria Dickson, principal at St. Paul School in Pocahontas, said adopting such a system in the interest of avoiding lengthening the school year is a popular option for all concerned.

"When we were given the OK to do this, I was on cloud nine," Dickson said. "Parents are ecstatic that we aren't adding days and our teachers know that a day added at the end of the year isn't very productive."

While the concept of cyber days is simple – provide students assignments to complete at home during the inclement weather day – pulling it off is not. At a recent meeting of principals, administrators shared best practices for the days, pointed out shortfalls and limitations and provided parental feedback.

Most there reported overwhelming support for the new option from parents; the most common concerns included all students having access to necessary technology and the type of work being assigned. Some principals pointed out many families in smaller schools may not be able to afford a family computer or Internet access.

The most senior practitioner of the concept – Mount St. Mary Academy – has been implementing cyber days for the past three years and has worked through some of the operational hiccups identified by the other school principals.

For instance, students are given extra time when they return to school to complete assignments if they were without power – therefore without Internet – during the bad weather.

Principal Diane Wolfe said the ability to exercise such online options when needed was one important consideration when the school began handing out laptops to every student in the fall of 2011. She said in addition to linking students with their professors and helping them to connect to assigned websites, cyber day is a good training ground for what many students will face in college.

An example of the creativity exhibited in carrying out cyber-day instruction includes the approach St. Mary School in Paragould took when it had to cancel regular classes Jan. 9.

Teachers texted or emailed their students' families that morning to offer assistance with assigned homework. Kindergarten teacher Denise Stoddard accessed her students via FaceTime, a video calling program for Macs, and had the youngsters

read to her, some still in their pajamas.

"All feedback so far is very positive," said Sharon Warren, principal. "Kids like it and parents do too. They even posted on Facebook what they were doing."

Hebda is associate editor of the Arkansas Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Little Rock.

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