CDE Message on Keeping Schools Open During PSPS events

Everyone wants to keep schools open when the power is out, yet there are significant challenges and risks in doing so. The conditions that either enable schools to open or require that schools are closed are local, and each school district charter school or county office must make the final call after reviewing all the considerations. It’s likely that our schools will again have to face the decision about closing school or operating without power.

Many schools were able to stay open despite not having power. In visiting some of those schools and talking with principals of others, the most important thing we’ve learned is the importance of advance planning and collaboration in our school communities.

Step 1: Plan for when the decision to close or stay open is made
Utilities make de-energization decisions in response to changing weather conditions. Local educational agencies need to communicate clearly with parents about when the school closure decision will be made, typically the night before or early in the morning on the day that school is closed. What’s critical is that parents know what to expect in terms of timing. There’s risk either way, and school superintendents will be criticized for either decision.

Step 2: Plan for communications
Communication is tough even when we have power. Here are some considerations for when the power is out:
A. Cell phones won’t always work if the cellular provider or the cell towers are without power. Also, some staff are reluctant to share personal cell numbers and others resent having to use their personal phones for school business.
B. Walkie-talkies can be effective until the charge runs out. If there aren’t enough for all staff, it’s crucial that key staff have them. Staff trained and performing service as fire watchers should have them, as well as office staff, security staff, and administrators. Conversations are heard by all, which can present a problem when teachers have them and the conversations disrupt the learning environment.
C. For contacting others outside of the school, it could be advantageous to have an analog phone line with an old phone that doesn’t require power. Fax lines are typically on analog phone lines.
D. When cell phones are working, social media is proving to be the most effective way to reach parents and the broader community. One school of 500 students held school without power until late morning when the air quality as a result of the smoke deteriorated to the point that school had to be closed. By using every one of the social media platforms, all but 12 students were released to a parent or guardian within 30 minutes.
Step 3: Plan with teachers
Provide grade level teams and departments with some time to come up with lesson plans that they can use when power is out. Together, teachers can come up with activities for a few days that will engage students and align with curriculum so that the day can be productive for learning.

Site leaders, teachers, and special education staff need time to plan for meeting the specialized needs of students with disabilities. Since school provides consistency and a reassuring place in students’ lives, some students with disabilities may be affected by the change in their routine. Others may need additional consideration for any special health care needs, including the charging of assistive technology and refrigeration for medications and specialized foods. Ensuring transportation needs are also of concern, as many students with disabilities count on home-to-school transport.

Step 4: Plan with classified staff
A. How to have class rosters, schedules, and emergency cards available when the computers aren’t working;
B. How to provide battery-powered light in restrooms;
C. How to provide non-perishable meals for students and mitigate food loss;
D. How to notify all in the building of an emergency such as a lockdown or a fire – and ensuring there’s no confusion about which signal tells staff and students to either leave the building or stay in their classrooms.

Step 5: Plan with the local fire department
When the fire alarm is not working, schools must provide fire watchers. The National Fire Prevention Association code provides guidance, but it also requires collaboration with the local fire department. Meeting with the local fire department is a crucial step in planning to have school without power. Under the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) code, fire watchers must be trained, and the local fire department can help with that.