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Going behind the scenes of a school snow day

Sarah Banse

It was 8 o'clock on Monday night and I thought my four children were asleep in their beds. My family was still digging out from a blizzard, which had clobbered the Northeast. West of Boston we fared better than many communities, with a mere 2 feet of the white stuff. My kids had banked on a snow day, but it never materialized.

"Mom, I know you don't love me! I finally get it. You don't like spending time with me," cried Claire, my 7-year-old daughter, as she descended the stairs. She was clad in a pink Lanz nightgown, covered in rosebuds and eyelet. Her cheeks the same color as the flowers.

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard you talking on the telephone with Gramma. You said how happy you were that we went to school today. We didn't get a snow day and you were happy about it!"

It was true. I was delighted that school was not canceled. I am not fazed by the snow. I grew up in Vermont. It was rare that we were granted a day off due to bad weather. So I get mildly miffed when school closings are handed out freely. Some people might say 2 feet of snow is sufficient evidence that school should be canceled. Lucky for me, however, I live in Wayland, Massachusetts, a town notorious for keeping its schools open when every neighboring community and practically every school in the commonwealth closes.

Our superintendent, Gary Burton, hails from Newfoundland and prides himself in the temerity of our students and bus drivers. After the Blizzard of 2005, when Wayland was the only school open, he told *The New York Times*

that an astonishing number of parents called to complain. I told this to a friend. We were dumbfounded. Who were these people with so much time on their hands they could call and gripe about their children being sent to school? These people were clearly not mothers of multiple, rambunctious, elementary school and preschool students.

For me, snow days are hell. They mean the dressing and undressing of 4-year-old Tom and 3-year-old Hugh all day long. Sweaters, snow pants, coats, mittens, hats and boots. Jack and Claire can dress themselves, but always want help with something. Like puppies at the pound, they all push to be the first out the door.

I remember the last snow day like it was yesterday. No sooner had I dressed Hugh than he fell face first into a snow bank. Jack hucked a snowball at Claire's face and two out of four were crying within the first minute. Once the screeching stopped, there was about four minutes of calm. Then the doorbell rang and the first of four retreated into the house. It was Hugh. His cheeks were red and wet and he smelled of fresh linens off the line. When he was disrobed, it was not long before Tom, then Claire, then Jack were all back inside. There were puddles of mud and snow and wet in the front hall, together with boots, hats, mittens, coats, snow pants, sweaters and socks in all shapes and sizes. Before they got their wet things off, they demanded hot chocolate with marshmallows as some divine right. They ate the marshmallows and left the rest.

Between the outings there were projects begun and left unfinished, Play-Doh stuck in the crevices of the floor boards and chair seats, markers uncapped on the carpet, Lincoln Logs scattered throughout the house, and this was after everyone had "cleaned up." I love my kids and would jump at the opportunity to have an individual snow day with each of them, but the mayhem of snow days en masse leaves me with a pounding headache and piles of laundry.

My anticipation during the school closings is crippling. I watch with trepidation as the lists of schools scroll through my television set. It seems an endless wait to the W's.

When Sudbury, our neighboring town, is listed on the board, I feel a gripping fear and a sudden sense of sorrow for my compatriot mothers living nearby. The towns continue to scroll by and we hit the W's. To my horror I see Wayland

"Oh, thank God! It is Wayland Academy in Framingham! The next town is, is ... yes! It's Wellesley!"

"What is it Mom? What are you yelling about?"

"Get dressed. Chop, chop. School is open!"

"You don't have to be so happy about it," groans Jack.

I try to backpedal.

"I know how much you guys like school and I just wanted you to be able to go."

"Oh c'mon, Mom, Jack and I hate school! Everyone hates school," says Claire.

When I can't hoodwink her I try the woman-to-woman approach.

"Well, you know it is a long day with the little boys, and if we were all cooped up inside it gets so loud, and you know how they fight."

"Six hours Mom. It is only six hours and you don't want to be with us!"

I feel a pang of guilt because I do remember the thrill of a snow day from my childhood. There was something magical about it. In my small town in Vermont, if there was no school, you would get a phone call from the bus driver herself. You would lie perfectly still and will the phone to ring.

Those days when the phone rang were good, but the ones that were truly charmed was when it wasn't snowing when you went to bed, and the thought of a snow day never crossed your mind. My Mom would attempt to wake my two brothers, my sister and me gently, yelling, "It's time, wake up!" This would be the first attempt to wake us up in a series of many. Each call was less melodious than the first. If the phone happened to ring before the next shout, it was a gift from God. One of us kids would dash to the phone on the kitchen wall. It was a quick call. Two words uttered by Bev Murray, our bad-tempered bus driver - no school! Her voice sounded like grating, old brakes. The return sprint was just as quick as the initial descent. Take the steps two at a time, run down the hall and jump straight back into a warm bed. Pure bliss.

Claire was right, of course. I had become the Grinch who stole snow days. When did I become the kind of woman that would begrudge a child a day off from school to build a snowman? Sometime between the birth of my third and fourth child, when my desire to keep order in a house of chaos and to see the bottom of the laundry basket overrode my sense of fun, I suppose.

I know come the next snow day, I will still be holding my breath between Wayland Academy and Wellesley. But should my kids be granted a reprieve I am going to try to appreciate the magic and not be stingy with the marshmallows.

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