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As other schools shut for snow, Shaker Road School stays open

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Like most kids in Concord, Shaker Road School students went to sleep Tuesday night wishing for snow.

Not because they expected school to be canceled – Shaker students know better than that. The private school in east Concord has closed fewer than 10 times for weather in the almost 40 years since headmasters Doug and Patty Hicks opened it in 1979.

Instead, Shaker students wished for snow to fall Wednesday because at Shaker, snow means smaller class sizes, special activities and more time for making snowmen, building forts and ice skating after school on Shaker's sprawling 60-acre campus.

"It's a lot more fun when it snows," said Shaker sixth-grader Chilli Cabot, glancing outside at the falling flakes from his language arts classroom Wednesday afternoon.

Shaker is known for its dependability, even when most other schools close. On any given day, the day care-through-ninth school is open for regular class hours, but there is also always staff available from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. for parents who have to drop off or pick up their kids outside of school hours to accommodate their schedules.

Most after-school sports and activities take place on the campus, which has pools and a golf course.

Working parents are a big reason why Shaker is so committed to being open, head of school Patty Hicks said.

"Our parents need us to be open so they can get to their jobs," Hicks said. "They

rely on us in that way.”

Plus, fewer days off in the winter means more days off in June, when many public schools are still making up time, Hicks said.

Ninth-grader Baxter Curry has been a student at Shaker Road for 10 years, and he said the school has probably canceled for inclement weather twice in that time.

“We always plan to go to school, no matter what’s happening with the weather,” Curry said.

The Concord School District, on the other hand, has already canceled school at least two times this winter – including Wednesday.

The Shaker Road headmaster explained that in the rare cases the school closes, it’s usually due to the governor declaring a state of emergency. But when the weather doesn’t look too severe, Shaker leaves it up to parents to make their own call on whether it’s safe to drive.

Even when students miss school for weather – around 20 percent of the school’s students missed Wednesday – children take work home, or use the school’s electronic portal to access materials.

“Our kids want to learn,” language arts and Latin teacher Tad Curry said. “They’re always looking to the next step.”

But snowy days at Shaker are usually structured at least slightly differently than normal days. On Wednesday, the hallways of one middle school building were lined with boots and snow pants still drying from recess.

In math class, 11-year-old Avery Sahr said they combined problem sheets with computer games and coloring in groups. Sixth-grader Leah Wareing said on previous snow days, they’ve had guest speakers come in.

“It was something different than we usually do,” Wareing said. “It makes the day stand out.”

When the school does close, Hicks said it’s usually a big deal for students and faculty.

“When we closed one day last year, one of the teachers took a picture of the TV screen from WMUR, put on Facebook and said, ‘It’s historic. Shaker is actually closed,’” Hicks said, laughing.

She said when the school hires new staff, they tell them not to count on many winter days off.

“When we hire people, we say, ‘Just so you know, we don’t have snow days,’ ” she said.

But she said it’s not a problem for most teachers, many of whom have worked at the school for decades and commute from all over the state. One elementary school teacher, Kim Stewart, has been with the school for more than 30 years, commuting from Auburn.

“People don’t mind coming in,” Hicks said. “We like working here. We want to be here.”

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