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### Cancellations Tough to Call, Even for the Best School Chiefs - Silberman Retains Credibility by Not Trying to Snow Anyone

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## **CANCELLATIONS TOUGH TO CALL EVEN FOR BEST SCHOOLS CHIEF - SILBERMAN RETAINS CREDIBILITY BY NOT TRYING TO SNOW ANYONE**

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Friday, February 9, 2007

Author: Richard Day

The best school superintendents spend their waking hours communicating and driving district personnel to increase student achievement. They want high attendance, not low attendance. They want more school days, not fewer. They want to have school.

The hardest decisions a school superintendent has to make are those that go beyond his control, such as deciding whether to call off school when bad weather threatens.

Sometimes conditions are bad enough that school cancellations can be announced the night before. Other times, it's a close call made at 5 a.m. Then there is a four-hour window of time after the decision to have class is made and until the last child arrives at school.

In that time, the winds can change and turn a seemingly solid decision into mush. That's when school officials hold their collective breath.

Such was the case with Fayette County Schools Superintendent Stu Silberman recently when he admitted to a blown call to have school on a snowy Groundhog's Day.

Silberman was reportedly bombarded with complaints from pretty much everywhere, and he reassessed the situation. Then he did something refreshing. He apologized.

A student at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School started a group on Facebook called "Stu wouldn't know a snow day if it hit him in the face." It featured a South Park-style rendering of Silberman in front of a school bus being hit with snow balls.

The group's creator wrote, "Don't get me wrong guys, I love Stu. I just get the feeling that he has a bad system for calling snow days."

More than 440 high school students joined the group to vent frustrations and blame and to defend Silberman. They posted reports of Henry Clay students spamming the superintendent's e-mail and a mini-boycott where some Tates Creek seniors "just sat in their cars during first block."

One student did blame Silberman for his car being rear-ended, but there were only a couple of snide bicycle references. What I found interesting was the general tone taken by most of the district's high school students. It was pretty mild.

Apologizing would seem to be the most reasonable and honorable thing for any superintendent to do. But it requires courage to expose oneself to blame instead of seeking scapegoats, and some have found that difficult.

Former Superintendent Robin Fankhauser refused to accept responsibility when the district failed

to update a required facilities plan that stood to cost the district \$8 million in sorely needed facilities-construction money.

Instead of accepting responsibility, she complained that she had been defamed by the public comments of some board members who demanded accountability. She was forced into retirement, and it apparently took some legislative arm twisting by state Sen. Alice Forgy Kerr to get the funds restored.

Silberman's bad snow-day call doesn't rise to the level of an \$8 million mistake, but only because there were no tragic accidents as a result.

When things go wrong, as they will, and the superintendent wants us to believe his explanation of events, it will help if he has already established a pattern of behavior that allows him the benefit of the doubt. Silberman followed up his apology by getting it right on the next snowy day, and dismissing school early yet another day.

Then, on Wednesday, he got a curve ball. This time the northeast section of Fayette County got snow and the rest of the county did not. Once again Silberman fielded angry calls; this time for not having school. But angry calls aside, he made the right choice.

When deciding whether road conditions will permit school, the only appropriate basis for consideration is the whole county; anything less devalues someone and endangers someone.

Silberma worked hard and made friends before he needed them. From his first day on the job, he redirected district leadership, opened the planning process to the public and committed himself for the long haul.

The school board probably could not hold him to his commitment to serve 10 years, but when his name was being bandied about as a candidate to replace departed Kentucky Education Commissioner Gene Wilhoit, Silberman didn't miss a beat before taking his name out of the conversation.

Silberman has earned the confidence people place in him.

Caption: (1) by CHARLES BERTRAM , STAFF - Fayette County schools were in session Feb. 2 despite the weather, and the superintendent was bombarded with complaints.

(2) - **Richard Day** of Lexington is a former principal of Cassidy Elementary School.

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