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Schools closed after MHS loses heat

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As the temperatures dropped below zero again last week, students at Medford High School felt the results of the cold snap when one of three boilers used to heat the 33-year-old building stopped working. In the wake of this problem and other cold-related issues system-wide, Superintendent of Schools Roy E. Belson decided to close all schools on Friday.

In the early morning hours between Jan. 22 and Jan. 23, the high school boiler failed after a decision was made to increase the heat in the school, Belson said. He said running the boilers overnight to drive more steam into the pipes caused the breakdown.

Maintenance crews and the vendor were summoned to begin immediate repairs to the boiler. In the meantime, Belson said he walked around the building informing teachers and staff of the problem and advising that anyone feeling the effects of the boiler's failure move to warmer parts of the school.

Students, however, were angry Belson would keep school open instead of allowing them to go home. Many said it was difficult to sit in cold classrooms.

"It was 54 degrees in my history class," said senior Vannessa DioGuardi. "We kept having to change classrooms because some of them have heat and some don't. In our art class, we had to move to the library, and we were still there doing art, painting in our jackets and gloves and hoods. These gloves haven't left my hands."

Other students said the school was cold since long before the boiler broke down.

"It's been freezing the whole week," said Jackie Bova, another senior. "I've had my jacket on three days straight. I saw my breath earlier."

MHS was not the only school dealing with winter problems. Over the past 14 days, there have been isolated heating problems at the Voke, with pipes at both the Andrews and the McGlynn and a boiler at the Fulton School, which caused the building to be closed one day.



Belson attributed the problems to the cold.

"When can anyone remember it being so cold in recent years?" he asked. "We've been asking for an incredible

response from our systems."

By late afternoon Thursday, Belson said he was confident the boiler problem would be fixed. He said he did not anticipate send students home, but added if the heat wasn't back on by late evening he would consider closing school Jan. 24.

Shortly after 1:30 p.m., several students marched into Belson's office, demanding the superintendent listen to their complaints.

"I met with the students and I could tell their hearts weren't in going to their last period," he said. "After talking to them, I said, 'Let's go home' and called it. We met the legal requirement for the day."

Belson added he was at MHS until around 11 Thursday night, long after the heat came back on and began to permeate the building. However, he said he decided to call off school Friday anyway.

"I think people understand there's a psychology of cold," Belson said. "The week was very cold and by the end it seemed like it was too long and I knew we wouldn't get any good work done anyway. I felt the right thing to do was take a break."

Belson said by Monday, he had spoken with teachers and students at MHS, who were glad to have had a day off.

"I walked around the different classrooms and the teachers and kids were all talking about how much better it is now," he said. "You could see the difference. They were livelier and joking."

School Committee Vice Chair Paulette Van der Kloot said she fully supported Belson's decision to close school last Friday. She said she had spoken to a Voke teacher during the wake for Joshua Prince, who passed away last week, and been told that it was freezing in certain classrooms.

"There's only so much you can do when conditions are so extreme," she said. "It's been very frustrating because the School Committee has put so much money into the heating systems and we think they're fixed. It's like a house. You fix one thing and another thing breaks."

Van der Kloot added students dealing with consistently cold weather as well as the death of a friend were under a lot of stress. Belson's decision was welcome relief for many students, faculty and administrators.

"Roy's taken hits before, but it was a difficult decision to call off school for the entire system," she said. "But you know what? It was important. MHS teachers and students have been dealing with a lot, the cold and the emotional stress. I honestly think Roy made the right decision. They all needed to regroup. It was for the betterment of the entire school system."

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