Winter storm hits central Illinois with snow, frigid temperatures

PEORIA —

Be careful what you wish for.

Anyone who felt cheated by this winter's lack of, well, winter weather received a triple shot of reality Thursday as steady snow, frigid temperatures and high winds blew into central Illinois before dawn and stuck around all day.

It was the first measurable snowfall of the winter and the first time the area had seen at least an inch of snow in 320 days, 10 days shy of the all-time snow drought record set in 1918. It last snowed at least an inch on Feb. 25, 2011.

"The snow has pretty much fallen the way we had forecast, somewhere in the 3- to 5-inch range in central Illinois," said Matt Barnes, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Lincoln.

By 6 p.m. Thursday, the latest data available, 4 inches of snow had fallen at Gen. Wayne A. Downing Peoria International Airport. It still was snowing at 8 p.m., with winds gusting upward of 35 mph. Temperatures that had reached 55 degrees 24 hours earlier dipped to as low as 15 degrees.

The timing of the storm made school-cancellation decisions tricky for some superintendents, a no-brainer for others. No area schools closed for the day because of the weather. Some, such as Henry-Senachwine and Midland school districts, dismissed classes in the early afternoon. Most canceled all after-school activities including varsity basketball games, swim meets and wrestling matches.

"Given the weather predictions, we were fairly comfortable keeping school in session today. Since the snowfall started early morning and would continue through the day with an expected accumulation of three to five inches, there would be ample time to clear the roadways by school dismissal," said Jay Marino, superintendent of the Dunlap school district. "Living in the Midwest, we are accustomed to tolerating weather conditions like today."

Nick Polyak, superintendent of the Illinois Valley Central school district in Chillicothe, wavered some on the cancellation question early Thursday morning. An amount of blowing snow was being forecast that had the potential to close school, but at 5:30 a.m., the point of no return, it wasn't really snowing.

"This was a tough one this morning for a number of reasons. In general, you can look at the estimates, but you never know what to expect in terms of the actual snowfall until it happens," Polyak said, who decided not to close school for the day. "I usually try to have a decision made by 5:30 a.m. because we have a number of teachers who commute a great distance to come to work every day. In today's case, that was about when the snow started to fall."

For Roger Alvey, superintendent of the Elmwood school district, the decision to stay open was based on one solid piece of evidence: It wasn't snowing when he checked.

"There are about six superintendents throughout the county that I communicate with early in the morning on snowy days. Each of us also talks with our road commissioners. This morning, I did not have to talk to anyone, and received communication from no one," Alvey said. "(Friday) morning will be a different story, with the expected wind."

Illinois Department of Transportation and city of Peoria snowplows were challenged by the blowing snow and cold conditions.

"The snow freezes on the surface making it more difficult to plow," said David Barber, Peoria's director of Public Works. "But we'll be fine."

IDOT's District 4 had more than 100 plows on the roads in its 12-county region that includes the Tri-County Area.

"Whenever there is blowing snow, it makes keeping the roads clear a bigger challenge. It doesn't slow us down but it does increase the snow that ends up on the pavement," said Brian Williamsen, spokesman for District 4. "We still have more than 100 crews out there in the district. We're making progress, but it is still snowing out there."

Lonnie Seidel drives the early bird bus for CityLink and was driving the streets of Peoria by 4:30 a.m. before the snow started falling. By 5 a.m. he was driving atop snow.

"I didn't see any accidents, but people were sliding all over the place and driving all crazy," said Seidel, a seven-year CityLink veteran.

He took a break about 8:15 a.m., but started his second shift at 2 p.m.

"That's the one I'm concerned about," he said. "I drive down the hill on Allen Road to War Memorial and that's slippery when it's just wet. When it's snowy you got to be careful or you could easily start to fishtail."

The snow ends by Friday, but temperatures won't recover much. The high forecast for Friday is 17 degrees and the winds are expected to diminish only a little. Another inch or so of snow is possible Saturday. Mondays high temperatures are expected to be in the 40s.