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To: North Dakota Educators
From: Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction
Date: March 13, 2020
RE: Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in K-12 Schools

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) In K-12 Schools

Decision Making

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) is the State Education Agency charged with overseeing and supporting North Dakota schools. In North Dakota, local school districts have a great amount of decision-making authority over how their districts operate. The State often lays the foundation, then provides districts with flexibility to meet the needs of their unique communities. The decision to close schools is regularly made by local superintendents in response to weather and other events in order to maintain the health and safety of students and staff. However, during a health-related outbreak such as this, it is recognized that local school districts look to their state health, safety and education agencies in addition to the Governor's Office, for direction. We as a State will continue to assist in providing the most current and accurate information.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued [specific guidance](#) on school closures related to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on March 13, 2020.

Expectations and general guidance for schools:

- Communicate regularly with students, families, staff, and the larger school community.
- Practice routine cleaning and disinfecting procedures of commonly touched surfaces.
- Maintain an open line of communication with their local public health officer.
- Intentionally and persistently combat stigma through information sharing. COVID-19 is not at all connected to race, ethnicity, or nationality.
- Actively engage in contingency planning for the possibility of extended school closures.

There are other expectations and considerations from NDDPI as this situation unfolds. Some Higher Education campuses such as North Dakota State University, University of North Dakota, and some other universities are extending the spring break and/or moving to an online platform for student classes. It is important to note that K-12 and North Dakota University System (NDUS) are both educational institutions; however, they serve different clients and the impact on closing down those facilities have very different ramifications to the community. Do not assume that K-12 should close because some university campuses have chosen to. This could create community issues beyond the educational setting:

- Children have not been identified as a vulnerable population to become seriously ill from contracting COVID-19.
- Closing schools will inevitably lead to many parents and caregivers without alternate childcare options. Many parents could be forced to stay home from work, including essential health care workers, which could have unforeseen consequences on the ability to care for affected populations.
- Many families may turn to alternate caregivers, such as grandparents and other elderly extended family members, who are known to be more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Special Education

If a district has extended school closures, the district will remain responsible for the free appropriate public education (FAPE) of its students eligible for special education services with an individualized education program (IEP). Districts should be communicating with parents and guardians prior to, during, and after a school closure regarding their child's IEP services. After an extended closure, districts are responsible for reviewing how the closure impacted the delivery of special education and related services to students eligible for special education services. Please note, if a school closure causes educational services for all students to pause within a school or district, then the school/district is generally not required to provide services to the affected students eligible for special education services during that same period of time. To learn more about new guidance from the U.S. Department of Education regarding students receiving special services, please click [here](#).

Online Learning

Most districts are not prepared to implement a distance learning model, such as online learning, on short notice. Some districts and schools may be in a position to continue teaching using distance learning methods through the North Dakota Center for Distance Education (NDCDE); however, equity is a critical consideration. It is important to note that if educational services are being delivered to students in any form, in order for the district to remain open, those services must be provided to all students, including students who don't have access to technology at home and students receiving special education services. NDDPI believes that for most districts, it will make more sense to cancel school altogether than to organize a learning model that cannot be accessed equitably by all students.

Recommendations for Non-essential Events and Public Gatherings

Governor Doug Burgum, in conjunction with the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH), released recommendations on March 12, 2020 for events and public gatherings in light of the spread of COVID-19. The recommendations outline different strategies for events and public gatherings based on three levels of risk, or thresholds.

Following are definitions and recommendations for the three risk levels:

- **Low Risk - Threshold 1** means unmitigated or uncontained community transmission of coronavirus is occurring elsewhere, but there may not be evidence of significant community transmission in North Dakota yet. At this level, authorities should consider initiating minimally restrictive, or burdensome, but effective mitigation measures. Additionally, authorities should consider canceling or postponing events where a substantive number of attendees are from high-risk locations or high-risk populations.
- **Moderate risk - Threshold 2** is defined as evidence that unmitigated or uncontained community transmission of coronavirus is occurring in at least one geographic jurisdiction within the state. At this level, authorities should consider canceling or rescheduling events if located within the area that has community transmission of the disease or if a large number of attendees are anticipated to come from

these impacted areas. Consider alternative attendance options such as web-based, televised only, or remote attendance.

- **High Risk - Threshold 3** means there is widespread community transmission of coronavirus within North Dakota. At this level, authorities should cancel or postpone all events that involve the potential for disease transmission and cannot accommodate alternative attendance options.

Additionally, the CDC recommends schools consider non-closure social distancing first. Examples include cancelling of inter-district events, inter-school events, school assemblies, and staggering school recesses.

Make-up Days for School Closures

If a school district closes schools in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, they should make every effort to make up missed hours of instruction, including using scheduled vacation days, professional development days, and other planned school closure days. Districts should make up as much time as possible, using those previously scheduled closure days, through June 30. If districts feel they cannot make up the minimum hours of instruction, the Governor's Office may grant school districts emergency waivers.

Student Attendance

Many districts, parents, and guardians have expressed worry about student absences related to COVID-19 safety concerns.

Many parents in North Dakota have begun to consider keeping their children home to protect their child from contracting COVID-19. Questions have arisen regarding if a parent can keep their child home for an extended period, and if there will be a consequence if they do. In these cases, parents have the ultimate decision-making authority regarding their children. School board members and administrators are encouraged to look at their current attendance and contagious disease policies and make the most logical and practical decision. NDDPI asks that districts keep student safety and wellbeing at the forefront when making any decision that impacts student learning.

Districts should also review any student attendance incentive practice or procedure they have in place which might encourage a student to come to school when they are ill.

Assessment and Accountability

The United States Education Department (USED) has provided information to state education agencies that there may be flexibility for assessments and accountability as a result of COVID-19 on a case-by-case basis. Should the need arise, NDDPI will work with districts on adjustments related to state assessments scheduled this spring.

School Meals

Continuity of food services, especially for students experiencing poverty, is an important factor that NDDPI expects districts to consider before deciding to close school. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Services is providing information to states on an ongoing basis. NDDPI will work closely with affected schools regarding options for serving meals, should the need arise.

NDDPI is seeking multiple waivers from the USDA. The purpose of these waivers is to support schools and communities in providing meals to children in areas experiencing school closures due to COVID-19. The waivers propose to allow school districts to serve meals in a non-congregate setting, serve meals through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) at eligible and non-area eligible school sites, and serve meals that don't meet all meal requirements if access to certain food items becomes limited.

Notifications

If districts experience school closures, it is NDDPI's expectation that they follow their standard

procedure for notifying parents and guardians. This includes, but is not limited to, calls, emails, updates to their district websites, text messages, and contacting local news stations. If parents and families do not hear from their districts regarding a closure, they should contact their school principal or district superintendent.

NDDPI Continued Operations

The NDDPI's Executive Leadership Team is continuing to monitor the COVID-19 situation and the potential risks to internal operations and NDDPI staff. We are also discussing options on how to handle these risks.

In the meantime, to ensure that we are prepared for all possible situations to continue to provide support and services to our schools and students, our staff have:

- Ensured contact information is up to date.
- Stored essential logins and passwords.
- Reviewed and tested access to remote working capabilities.
- Set-up office communication chains.

More Information

NDDPI is working closely with the Governor's Office, ND Department of Health, ND Department of Emergency Services, and the North Dakota University System. NDDPI will provide ongoing guidance and resources regarding COVID-19 on the [NDDPI website](#). NDDPI will also be developing a Frequently Asked Questions document as more questions arise.

The best place to find accurate, up-to-date information regarding COVID-19 is the NDDoH [website](#). For further questions related to COVID-19, the public can call the NDDoH hotline at 1-866-207-2880.

If you have questions related to school operations during this outbreak, please contact Joe Kolosky with [NDDPI](#) at (701) 328-2755.

Kirsten Baesler
State Superintendent