

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Department of Education Issues Guidance on Student Instruction During COVID-19 School Closures

Harrisburg, PA - Today, the Department of Education released additional guidance for Pennsylvania schools about the instruction of students and operation of PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Programs during the COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Governor Tom Wolf announced Friday the two-week [closure of all Pennsylvania schools](#) beginning Monday, March 16, and the department provided [initial guidance](#) yesterday on which schools are closed, identifying essential personnel, the 180-day requirement and student meals during the closure.

“Education leaders across the commonwealth are working nonstop to meet the needs of their students during this critical time, from providing free meals to distributing instructional materials,” said Secretary of Education Pedro A. Rivera. “Today the department is issuing additional guidance to assist schools, their students and parents, and communities in these efforts. We will continue to provide guidance as we move forward.”

The following is the complete guidance provided to date:

What Schools Are Closed Statewide:

- All public K-12 schools, including brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, career and technical centers (CTCs), and intermediate units (IUs)
- Childcare centers operating within any of the above schools
- All universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education
- All other schools (including private, parochial, and institutions of higher education) should be consulted directly for the most current closure information

Within counties under aggressive social distancing guidelines:

- All schools - including private, parochial, and institutions of higher education - are required to close.

What staff may schools deem essential?

- These decisions should be made locally, in the context of school and community needs.

- Examples of essential responsibilities may include, but are not limited to, school administration, food preparation and distribution, information technology, and continuity of operations (e.g., payroll, and building operations).

What are the consequences for districts/schools that don't meet the 180-day/hours (990/900/450) requirements?

- PDE will not penalize districts/schools that fail to meet the minimum 180-day/hours (990/900/450) requirements as a result of COVID-19 response efforts.
- PDE will provide a simplified form that districts/schools can use to report any shortfall in days or hours.

How will students access meals while schools are closed?

- Pennsylvania sought and received approval from the Federal government to allow schools the option to distribute meals at no cost while schools are closed.
- Districts/schools that want to act on this Federal approval must apply to PDE.
- PDE has begun and continues to expedite approvals.
- Districts/schools may utilize essential staff to ensure students have access to meals.
- PDE is partnering with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, other state agencies, the American Red Cross, and public and private partners to expand these efforts.

Are schools required to provide any type of instruction during the closure of schools due to COVID-19 response efforts?

- No. PDE recognizes that the rapidly evolving pandemic may make it impossible to implement continuity of education plans.
- Although not required, many schools have plans, or are creating plans, to provide continuity of education.
- Intermediate units are preparing to offer technical assistance for schools interested in developing such plans; that support will be available by Friday, March 20.

For school entities considering continuity of education, what options are available?

- Educational services may continue in a variety of ways, including:
 - Flexible Instruction Days for districts/schools with approved plans
 - Online/digital learning opportunities
 - Non-digital learning opportunities (e.g., materials sent home with students)
- The decision to employ one or more of the above methods of continuity of education is to be made at the local level based on feasibility, availability of resources, access and equity considerations, and the Commonwealth's social distancing recommendations.
- Whatever decision is made, LEAs must ensure full access to learning for all

students, with particular attention to free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and English as a second language (ESL) services for English Learners.

Is a school required to continue to provide FAPE to students with disabilities during a school closure caused by COVID-19 response efforts?

- When a school is closed because of COVID-19 response efforts and does not provide any educational services to the general student population, the school is not required to provide services to students with disabilities during that closure period. Once school resumes, the district/school must provide special education and related services to the child in accordance with the child's individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.
- When a school is closed because of COVID-19 response efforts and does provide educational services to the general student population, the school must ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of FAPE. In addition, districts/schools must ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, each student with a disability can be provided the special education and related services identified in the student's IEP or Section 504 plan. Once school resumes, a child's IEP team (or appropriate personnel under Section 504) must make an individualized determination whether and to what extent compensatory services may be needed, consistent with applicable requirements, including to make up for any skills that may have been lost during the closure within a reasonable timeframe.

Will Early Intervention services be offered while schools are closed?

- Preschool Early Intervention programs should suspend all services to children and families in alignment with public K-12 closures.
- If the Preschool Early Intervention administrative offices are open while Preschool Early Intervention services are suspended, referrals to Early Intervention should continue to be managed by the program; once services resume, referrals can proceed.

Are PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Programs expected to close?

- PA Pre-K Counts (PKC) and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) Grantees operating within a K-12 building should close in alignment with the closure of all public schools.
- Those grantees operating PKC or HSSAP in community-based settings have the discretion to continue to operate unless the county is under aggressive social distancing guidelines (Montgomery, Delaware, Bucks, and Chester counties as of March 14).
- In order to track program impacts, closures must be reported to both the Preschool Program Specialist assigned to each grant and to the Office of Child Development and Early Learning: RA-PWOCDELFacilclose@pa.gov.

The PDE guidance documents can be found on the PDE webpage - education.pa.gov/COVID19 - under “Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (COVID-19).”

For more information about Pennsylvania's education policies and programs please visit the [Department of Education's website](#) or follow PDE on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Pinterest](#).