

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in K-12 Schools: *An LEA Guide*

March 12, 2020

About COVID-19

Although there are no confirmed cases of respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Alabama, this virus can spread from person-to-person and the number of detected cases across our country is growing. This guide is intended to notify Local Education Agencies (LEAs) of our state's health outbreak school closure procedures and to be a resource of information.



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State vs. Local Authority

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) is the state education agency charged with overseeing and supporting Alabama's 142 public school districts and 1,470 schools. In Alabama, local school districts have a great amount of decision-making authority over how their districts operate. The state often lays the foundation, and 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. During a health-related outbreak, the ALSDE works in consultation with the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) to determine school closures.

Local superintendents are advised to follow the expert advice and direction of public health officials. In the event of a health outbreak, the ALSDE will work in consultation with the ADPH to determine school closure. Upon becoming aware that a student or employee in a district has a confirmed case of COVID-19, the local superintendent must:

1. Immediately contact ADPH and the State Superintendent.
2. Close all schools in the district for a minimum of 24-48 hours while the ADPH determines the extent of the infection.
3. Not reopen schools without clearance from ADPH/ALSDE.
4. Follow standard procedure for notifying parents and guardians.
This includes, but is not limited to, calls, emails, and text messages.

Expectations of Schools

1. Communicating regularly with students, families, staff, and the larger school community.
2. Practicing enhanced school cleaning and disinfecting procedures.
3. Maintaining an open line of communication with ALSDE and ADPH.
4. Intentionally and persistently combatting stigma through information sharing. COVID-19 is not at all connected to race, ethnicity, or nationality.
5. Engaging actively in contingency planning for the possibility of extended school closures.
6. Encouraging students and staff to use "respiratory etiquette" through education and provision of supplies.
7. Encouraging preventative actions such as staying at home when sick.

Student Attendance and Make-Up Days for School Closure

Many districts, parents, and guardians have expressed concern about student absences related to COVID-19 safety concerns. Standards for mandatory and enforceable attendance in Alabama requires school leaders to excuse absences such as illness or other health conditions. Within certain parameters, the law also provides districts with the authority to define additional categories or criteria for excused absences, should the need arise. The ALSDE knows that community fears may be high as identified cases increase, but we do not believe healthy students should be excluded from school or school activities so long as it is safe and appropriate.

In accordance with state law, if the Governor declares a state of emergency, districts will not be required to make-up school days within the window of a state of emergency. Each school is expected to have at least 1080 hours of instruction during the 2019-2020 school year. Please note, it is ALSDE's expectation that districts will maintain their graduation timelines.

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; 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, access to those services must be equally provided, including to students who don't have access to technology at home and students receiving special education services. 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.

Testing

Should the need arise, ALSDE will work with districts on alternate scheduling or adjustments related to state tests scheduled to take place in the spring.

More Information

The best place to find accurate, up-to-date information is the State Department of Health website. The Department of Health has also established a call center to address questions from the public about COVID-19. **If you have questions about symptoms or exposure, call 1-800-338-8374.**

In addition, copies of ALSDE's guidance and resources related to COVID-19 are available on the ALSDE website. **If you have questions related to the topics above, contact ALSDE State School Nurse, Jennifer Ventress, at 334-268-0133 or jventress@alsde.edu.**

ALSDE's COVID-19 Communications Timeline as of March 12, 2020:

1. **Memo from Dr. Scott Harris, State Health Officer (FY20-2054)**
 - a. Procedures for students and staff returning from China or areas with active community transmission
 - b. Procedures for students without travel history who become symptomatic
 - c. Immediately notify ADPH Infectious Diseases & Outbreaks Division at 1-800-338-8374

2. **Dr. Mackey's Updates to Local Superintendents (March 6, 2020)**
 - a. Governor's Task Force established
 - b. ALSDE Contact Info- State School Nurse, Jennifer Ventress (334) 268-0133, jventress@alsde.edu
 - c. Field Trips and Large Gatherings
 - i. Strong consideration given to out-of-country travel
 - ii. Check up-to-date information regarding out-of-state travel destinations
 - iii. Activities like sports, plays, etc. – normal activities continue with preventative measures (hand washing, etc.) in place
 - d. Disruptions to school schedules – use same protocol as currently in place for flu (updated health outbreak procedures in this LEA guide)

3. News conference link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5xqgCOxVTE&feature=youtu.be>

4. **Dr. Mackey's Updates to Local Superintendents (March 10, 2020)**
 - a. Recommend cancelling overseas travel rest of school year
 - b. If a confirmed case of COVID-19 is on school campus, immediately close school for 24 to 48 hours and work with ADPH and ALSDE for further recommendations
 - c. Continue to use 24-hour fever rule until further notice
 - d. Review/update your Pandemic Response Plan

5. **Dr. Mackey's Second Updates to Local Superintendents (March 10, 2020)**
 - a. News release from the USDA regarding congregate rule for CNP Programs

6. **Dr. Mackey's Updates to Local Superintendents (March 11, 2020)**
 - a. LEA Personnel Guidance regarding Sick Days
 - b. Student/Teacher Interns

7. LEA Guide Publication (3/12/20)

8. Parent Guide Publication (3/12/20)