

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MARCH 9, 2020

For More Information Contact:

JP O'Hare or Jeanne Beattie

(518) 474-1201

www.nysed.gov

State Education Department and State Department of Health Issue Updated Guidance to Schools Regarding Novel Coronavirus

Guidance Requires Immediate 24-Hour School Closure If Staff or Student Attended School Prior to Being Confirmed Positive as COVID-19 Patient

[Dedicated Webpage Established for School Resources Related to COVID-19](#)

Updated Guidance Issued to Colleges and Universities

The New York State Education Department and the State Department of Health today issued [updated guidance](#) to school and community health officials regarding the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which includes the requirement for schools to close for 24 hours if a student or staff member attended school prior to being confirmed as a positive COVID-19 patient. When a student or staff member attended school prior to being confirmed as a COVID-19 case, New York State Department of Health requires an initial 24-hour closure, in order to begin an investigation to determine the contacts that the individual may have had within the school environment. That investigation will inform the plan determined by the local department of health as to any further required closure, or other necessary precautions to take for specific classrooms, or for specific individuals.

The guidance provides an update on measures needed to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak as well as recommended non-pharmaceutical interventions and community containment measures that may be useful to reduce disease transmission in schools including a checklist for schools to assist in planning. NYSED also provided [updated guidance to colleges and universities](#) in New York state. All resources for schools related to COVID-19 can be found [NYSED's dedicated website](#).

"As we continue to see an increase in the number of novel coronavirus cases, we must ensure that schools have the information and resources to respond appropriately working in coordination with the state and local health departments," said Board of Regents Chancellor Betty A. Rosa. "The Board of Regents and the Department will continue to work with our partners at the state, local and federal level to keep our school leaders informed as this situation continues to evolve so that they can best protect the children of New York State."

"In close consultation with our partners at the New York State Department of Health, we developed this updated guidance for schools across the state to help us ensure the health and safety of students during this emerging health concern," said State Education Department Interim Commissioner Shannon Tahoe.

"The measures outlined in the guidance reflect best practices for reducing exposure and transmission of infectious diseases in community settings, such as schools. We will remain in close contact with the Health Department and will update and disseminate additional guidance as necessary."

Commissioner of the New York State Department of Health Dr. Howard Zucker said, "The New York State Department of Health is working closely with the State Education Department and our other partners at the federal, state and local level on this constantly evolving public health emergency. We will continue to work to ensure that people across the state have up-to-date information in order to protect themselves and their families."

The guidance outlines strategies for early, broad and sustained community containment strategies that are effective in reducing the spread of the virus. These measures are scalable and flexible by design so that local public health and education authorities can use these tools based on the local situation. A comprehensive, layered approach reduces disease transmission and associated illness during an outbreak.

Summary of the Guidance

Guidance for Schools with Identified Cases of COVID-19 in Their Community

The local health department will notify schools if and when a school must close due to COVID-19 and when a school can reopen. School administrators should work in close collaboration and coordination with the state and local health officials to close school and/or cancel large events. Schools are not expected to make decisions about closing or canceling events due to COVID-19 on their own. Schools can seek specific guidance from the State or local health officials to determine if, when, and for how long to take these steps. This does not limit the statutory or regulatory authority of a school board to close a building for other circumstances. The nature of these actions (e.g., geographic scope, duration) may change as the local outbreak situation evolves.

When a student or staff member attended school prior to being confirmed as a COVID-19 case, New York State Department of Health requires an initial 24-hour closure, in order to begin an investigation to determine the contacts that the individual may have had within the school environment. That investigation will inform the plan determined by the local department of health as to any further required closure, or other necessary precautions to take for specific classrooms, or for specific individuals. Such plan must recommend actions for future positive COVID-19 cases as well.

During that initial 24-hour closure the school shall immediately take steps to disinfect the school building(s) where the student or staff had contact prior to testing positive for COVID-19. That disinfection must be in accordance with NYS DOH guidelines and must be complete before accepting returning students.

- Schools should work with the state and local health departments to communicate the possible COVID-19 exposure. This communication to the school community should align with the communication plan in the school's emergency operations plan. In such a circumstance, it is critical to maintain confidentiality of the student or staff member as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).
- If a student or staff member has been identified as testing positive for COVID-19, school and program administrators should notify state health officials to determine what additional steps are

needed for the school community. In addition, students and staff who are well but are taking care of, or share a home with, someone with a case of COVID-19 must not attend school and must follow precautionary quarantine instructions from State health officials, who will determine when it is safe for them to return to school.

Schools can prepare now for possible school closures:

- Review the usual absenteeism patterns at your school among both students and staff.
- Alert State and local health officials about large increases in student and staff absenteeism, particularly if absences appear due to respiratory illnesses (like the common cold or the "flu," which have symptoms similar to symptoms of COVID-19).
- Review attendance and sick leave policies. Encourage students and staff to stay home when sick.
- Discourage the use of perfect attendance awards and incentives.
- Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff.
- Determine what level of absenteeism will disrupt continuity of teaching and learning.
- Prepare for continuity of critical support services including meals and special education services.

It is crucial that schools communicate with the state and local health departments. Schools are also encouraged to communicate with families and the school community about what they can do to decrease the spread of illness; and help families and communities understand the important roles they can play in reducing the spread of COVID-19 and keeping schools open.

If there is a COVID-19 case related to a school, the school will be contacted by the State Health Department in consultation with the local health department. If a school has general questions about possible contacts and preparation related to COVID-19, they should contact the State Health Department at 1-888-364-3065 or the [local health department](#). For guidance related to educational institutions in New York City, see the [New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Coronavirus Webpage](#).

Decisions about the need for exclusion and the length of the exclusion period for students and staff exposed to or with confirmed cases of COVID-19 will be made by local health departments according to guidance from New York State Department of Health. As a reminder, while schools have the authority to exclude a student in the public schools who shows symptoms of any communicable or infectious disease reportable under the public health law that imposes a significant risk of infection of others in the school, schools DO NOT have the authority to exclude well or asymptomatic students and staff based on race, country of origin, religious affiliation or any of these perceived statuses.

International Travel-Related Considerations for Schools

NYS DOH currently recommends:

- Suspending school sponsored travel programs for all students and staff in currently impacted countries (China, Iran, Italy, Japan, and South Korea);
- Developing plans to suspend programs in all other countries, regardless of whether they are currently impacted by CDC travel alerts, in case it becomes an impacted country pursuant to CDC guidelines; and
- Students and faculty returning from currently impacted countries or regions of impacted countries will be required to be quarantined for 14 days upon return, and this includes school sponsored travel or individual travel (spring break).

Review, Update, and Implement Emergency Plans

The first step in for preparing widespread community transmission in schools should be the review of the district's all-hazard emergency plans. More information on this is in the [NYS ED Guidelines for Managing Emergency Health Care and Communicable Disease in Schools](#).

Schools should review and update their current all-hazard emergency or pandemic plans and procedures. This should include updating contact information and communicating with vendors who supply critical products or services to plan for continuation of those services throughout this situation. Critical services may include food service and hygiene supplies. This planning is especially important since suppliers could also be affected by COVID-19.

It is important to continuously promote and facilitate fundamental infection control measures in school settings, not only during an outbreak. Schools should be proactive and developing plans for monitoring illness among students and staff, sending sick students and staff home, developing contingency plans to cover key staff positions when employees are home ill, and communicating with parents and staff on the importance of the exclusion recommendations. A checklist has been developed to assist schools in planning ([See APPENDIX A: School Preparation Checklist](#)).

Communication

It is crucial that schools communicate with state and local health departments as well as with families and the school community about what they can do to decrease spreading illness; and help families and communities understand the important roles they can play in reducing the spread of COVID-19 and keeping schools open. School administrators can also support their school community by sharing resources with students, their families, and staff.

Other Student Needs During School Closure

Ensure continuity of meal programs

Many students rely on the two meals served every day at school. Schools should work with community feeding organizations (food banks, food pantries, Red Cross, etc.) to plan for distribution of food to students by instituting meal pick-up and delivery options. If the President declares a National Disaster or if United States Department of Agriculture or New York State declares a situation of distress, public schools administering Child Nutrition Programs can contact the NYS Office of General Services and request to use USDA foods for feeding purposes, and schools could also request to administer the Summer Food Service Program or the Seamless Summer Option during times of emergency closure by contacting the NYS Education Department, Child Nutrition Program Administration office. Please check the NYSED Child Nutrition website [NYSED Child Nutrition Website](#) for updates.

Mental Health Needs

Schools can assist school and community members who feel anxious regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, they can be a source of valid information to assist in dispelling rumors and misunderstandings. Resources that address mental health needs of students and communities during an infectious disease outbreak can be found in the guidance and on the Department's [website](#).

Non-pharmaceutical Interventions


The following are nonpharmaceutical interventions schools should take during the outbreak of any communicable disease in the school setting. As always, schools should consult with the State Health Department and their local health department for guidance specific to the disease responsible for the outbreak.

- Students and staff should stay home when sick
- Separate ill students and staff
- All students and staff should practice responsible hand hygiene
- All students and staff should practice appropriate respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette
- All school facilities should undergo routine cleaning in accordance with Department of Health recommendations (See Appendix B: School Cleaning Guidance)

Updated [Guidance](#) related to handwashing recommendations and alcohol-based hand sanitizer use in schools is also included in the guidance. This guidance is based on best practice in infection control and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education (IHE)

In response to concerns regarding higher education students who are impacted by the coronavirus, either because they are returning from study-abroad programs or in the event of campus emergencies or closures, the NYS Education Department has also provided [updated guidance to colleges and universities](#).

 Institutions should monitor USDE, State and Local Department of Health websites for up-to-date information, guidance and instructions concerning COVID-19, including any protocol concerning students on campus and returning from study abroad programs.

NYSED's guidance document for colleges and universities includes provisions to:

- Allow for regulatory flexibility related to offering courses and programs online;
- Consider exceptions to IHEs published policies on granting course extensions/incompletes;
- Consider flexibility regarding withdrawal and refund policies;
- Consider options for substitution of credit bearing courses for credit-bearing experiential programs; and
- Assist students in finding comparable courses at other institutions where necessary and practicable.

Follow us:   

New York State Board of Regents

The State Education Department / The University of the State of New York / Albany, NY 12234

Office of Communications / (518) 474-1201