March 13, 2020

NEW MEXICO CLOSES K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO PREVENT POTENTIAL SPREAD OF COVID-19

SANTA FE – Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham announced Friday that New Mexico K-12 public schools will close for three weeks, effective Monday, March 16, to mitigate the risk of community spread of COVID-19.

The order closing all public pre-schools and K-12 schools will be effective through April 3 and may be extended as conditions warrant. Schools will not be required to make up the missed instructional days at the end of the academic year, the Public Education Department said.

“This is a proactive measure. New Mexico has no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our schools, but closing schools proactively **has been shown to be one of the most powerful non-pharmaceutical interventions we can deploy**,” Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said. “New Mexico is not going to wait as long as some other states to make the hard decisions. We will use every tool in our toolbelt as a state to keep New Mexicans safe,” she said.

Public colleges and universities are not included in the closure order. However, the governor strongly urged regents and governing boards to move or extend spring breaks and shift educational and business services to online models to the greatest extent possible.

School buildings also will remain open, including cafeterias and school-based health centers. School buildings could also be used for temporary child-care operations.

New Mexico joins other states, districts and counties in proactively closing schools before the community experiences a critical mass of confirmed cases, a strategy known as **“flattening the curve.”**

“We recognize the important roles schools play in delivering community services beyond educational instruction. However, we’ve heard loud and clear from superintendents and charter school leaders about their challenges to provide a safe, effective and healthy school environment in the current circumstances. With that feedback and concerns from our families in mind, we made the difficult decision in the interest of public health to close schools for three weeks to help combat the spread of COVID-19,” Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said.

“We’re listening. We’re in touch with educators and parents. This is not only the best practice for the state, it also fairly supports families, educators and schools,” the governor said.

Sixty New Mexico school districts will be on spring break for one of the three weeks of the announced closure period. The Public Education Department is encouraging the six districts with spring breaks planned after April 3 to consider moving those breaks to occur during the three-week closing.

Schools that are able to deliver distance learning to students may choose to offer this option during the closure period. PED will continue exploring all resources to provide educational opportunities to students while maintaining social distancing protocols and the prohibition of mass gatherings.

“New Mexico remains committed to providing our children with a quality education, but education is a service, not a place,” the governor said. “We’re dedicated to increasing opportunities to give students access to educational material during this period, and more information will be coming on that. Today, we’re working on containment, making sure kids are safe, making sure kids and families are fed, making sure the health care system is ready, making sure information is readily available and, last but not least, making sure our workers are paid and have security in knowing what’s coming.”

New Mexico has requested and expects to receive waivers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to allow school meal programs to continue with new flexibility. School kitchen staff will be on the job, preparing shelf-stable meals for grab-and-go pickup at school cafeterias and other sites for the many New Mexico families that depend on school meals.

USDA will reimburse the full cost of breakfasts and lunches for schools where 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, which covers nearly all New Mexico schools. PED is also working with other agencies like the Department of Aging and Long Term Services and the National Guard to identify potential additional meal distribution models.

School buildings also could be used for temporary child care facilities to meet additional demand during the closing.

“We recognize that child care is a critical service to support families and keep them safe,” the governor said. “We’re working very hard to expand child care opportunities, including requesting the necessary waivers from the federal government, in order to provide that service. If we need expanded child care, we’re also going to make that happen in public schools.”

The governor expects all school personnel to be on call during the closing and to continue being paid as usual. Stewart said the expectation is that all districts will provide wage security for employees.

School closings also will affect working parents, who will have to find child care or use leave time or telecommute (if those options are available) to stay home and care for children.

Starting Monday, the work-search requirement will be waived for anyone whose job is affected by COVID-19 who seeks unemployment compensation. Following a one-week waiting period, these workers could receive $433 per week for three weeks.

This compensation could help contracted school workers like bus drivers, event staff or servers who are either layed off or have their hours reduced.

Workers are highly encouraged to apply for benefits online at http://www.dws.state.nm.us. There is an 800 number available as well (877-664-6984) but online is the preferred option.

The Department of Workforce Solutions is exploring other funding sources to compensate workers who lose income due to COVID-19.

“Our goal is to keep businesses afloat and to protect workers and families,” the governor said.

State government will remain open, and state employees who need to be home with children will be allowed to telework, if possible; if not, they will be required to use personal leave time.

New Mexico had 10 presumptive positive COVID-19 cases as of Friday morning. All of them have a travel connection, the state Health Department said. School closings are designed to prevent or minimize community spread, which means at least some people infected with the virus are not sure how or where they became infected.

At least 13 countries so far have closed schools nationwide as a result of the pandemic, including China, where more than 233 million students were affected, according to the United Nations. Hundreds of K-12 schools in the U.S. have also closed as a proven measure to slow the spread of disease and, in turn, save lives.

The governor said she decided on a three-week closing based on facts available right now. “We’ll make additional decisions as they are warranted. Our goal is to be so effective at containment that three weeks is all we will need,” she said.

March 2, 2020

GOV. LUJAN GRISHAM SIGNS HOUSE BILL 10, ENDS STUDENT CO-PAYS FOR REDUCED-FEE LUNCHES