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GOVERNOR: K-12 SCHOOL CLOSINGS MUST CONTINUE TO PREVENT POTENTIAL SPREAD OF COVID-19

SANTA FE – New Mexico public education will shift to a learn-at-home model as schools remain closed for the rest of the academic year, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and state education and child care officials announced Friday.

The decision is part of a two-pronged plan to protect New Mexicans from COVID-19 and ensure that children are protected, fed and educated and that families are supported through this crisis.

The governor previously ordered all public schools closed for three weeks, March 16-April 3, but warned at the time that an extension could be needed. It came Friday with a new executive order that extends the closing through the end of the school year. The executive order can be found **here**. See answers to Frequently Asked Questions about the order **here**.

New Mexico had 136 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases as of Thursday afternoon, including some that are being investigated as community spread, the state Health Department said. School closings are designed to minimize community spread.

"We're working very hard to contain the virus, and we have to continue to take aggressive steps to mitigate spread and protect New Mexicans of every age all across the state. It is more important than ever that we make sure all New Mexicans are heeding the imperative to stay home," Gov. Lujan Grisham said. "Keeping schools closed is one of the most important tools we have to support the social distancing that can help us reduce and mitigate the spread of the virus."

“Schools will not be required to make up the missed instructional days between March 16 and April 3, but for the remaining weeks of the school year to be waived, districts must develop both technology-based and non-technology-based continuous learning plans,” Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said.

“We know that this decision will have tremendous implications for our families, but we must act to keep our communities safe and healthy,” Stewart said. “We also know that we have extraordinary teachers, support staff and school administrators in New Mexico. If the temporary closure period has shown us anything, it’s that our creative educators and school support staff are committed to meeting the academic, social and emotional needs of our students in challenging circumstances.”

High school credits will be awarded based on flexible approaches, including completion of work, demonstration of competency for course completion and expanded equivalency like work experience. The Public Education Department also recommends schools move to pass/no credit rather than grades during this period.

“While it can be difficult to view the current situation with anything beyond anxiety and apprehension, we believe the wide-reaching consequences of this moment present a tremendous opportunity to transform education to serve all students, especially students who have traditionally been furthest from opportunity,” said Deputy Secretary Kara Bobroff.

“The decisions we make today are made with all of our students in mind. During this unprecedented time, we will continue to build into the public education system healing opportunities for students, families, communities and all New Mexicans,” she said.

Public colleges and universities are not included in the closure order, but most have either extended their spring breaks, moved classes online or both.

School-based health centers, educational programming for youth in facilities, and licensed child care facilities (centers and homes) serving workers whose jobs have been deemed essential will continue operating.

The closing plan includes these provisions:

SPECIAL NEEDS
Students with special needs will receive all feasible supports and accommodations that can be delivered while maintaining safe social-distancing.

School districts must continue to support the transition of children from early intervention into preschool special education. Schools offering behavioral health services will remain open for that purpose.

HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

Individual districts will design measures by which seniors can demonstrate eligibility for graduation. Those measures could include testing, completing a series of assignments, achieving a set score on a college entrance exam or demonstrating applied work experience. Schools will be required to identify and support students in danger of not being able to graduate.

High school seniors will have until June 19 to demonstrate eligibility, and those who fail to do so will be offered credit recovery in the summer; they can also appeal to their local school board or to the secretary. No student will be denied graduation for lack of access to demonstrate competency.

Actual graduation ceremonies will be postponed or held virtually, depending on the prevailing public health order at the time.

Many high school seniors will have completed a college entrance exam already; additionally, many higher education institutions are expected to waive that requirement, and both the ACT and College Board are considering offering those exams in the summer.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT

Advanced placement exams will be offered online and will be limited to material students should have covered up to March. Accommodations will be made for those students who need access to technology to take the tests.

SCHOOL PERSONNEL

School personnel and contractors will remain on call and continue being paid as usual. Districts have already received guidance on activities employees can continue performing during the closure. Bus contractors are encouraged to continue operating bus routes to deliver food and hard-copy lessons. Special education and other service contractors are encouraged to provide virtual services, collaborate with general education teachers and maintain documentation.

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Every New Mexico school district has a plan to continue providing childhood nutrition during this period. You can see those plans here.

SANTA FE — The New Mexico Public Education Department is requesting a near-flat $3.3 billion budget for public schools in the next fiscal year while rolling out plans to increase the share going to schools with the greatest need.

“Equity is at the heart of this budget request,” Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said. “We’re getting additional money to the kids who need it most while giving districts the flexibility to determine at a local level what their students need.”

Stewart presented the Public School Support budget request to the Legislative Finance Committee on Wednesday. The request includes:

- $3.17 billion for the State Equalization Guarantee, the funding formula used to distribute money to the state’s 89 school districts;
- $162 million in funding restricted for specific uses including, for example, transportation, instructional materials and supports for Native American education.

Stewart is also seeking a one-time appropriation of $56 million from unspent education reform funds — money originally set aside to pay for school reforms like K-5 Plus and Extended Learning Time. If approved by the legislature, that money will be distributed over two years through a new Family Income Index, which will use state tax data to direct support to schools that serve students who are the most economically disadvantaged.

“Current support at the district level will continue, but the new index will allow us to get another $56 million directly to the schools serving lower-income families,” Stewart said.

“We’re looking to better identify the students who need the most support,” said Timothy Hand, deputy secretary for Policy, Strategy and Accountability.

The K-5 Plus and Extended Learning Time programs, which add hours or days to the academic calendar, were developed to improve academic outcomes for New Mexico children. To date, only 13 districts and two charter schools have opted into K-5 Plus while 79 districts and charter schools offer Extended Learning Time. As an incentive for more districts to opt in, the agency will ask the legislature to provide access to additional funds for community school grants and career and technical education programs for districts that opt into these extended learning opportunities.