

SCHOOL CLOSURE AND DISMISSAL DURING A NOVEL CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Technical Guidance for Local School Officials

Issued by the Vermont Department of Health and the Vermont Agency of Education.

Revised March 10, 2020

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to provide background information to local school officials as to why, when and how schools might be closed or dismissed in the context of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Much of the information in this guidance comes from documents published by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) including: [Interim Guidance for Administrators of US Childcare Programs and K-12 Schools](#).

School Closure and School Dismissal as Nonpharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs)

School closure and school dismissal are considered Nonpharmaceutical Interventions or NPIs by the CDC to help slow the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and to mitigate its impact. NPIs include actions that persons and communities can take to help slow the spread of respiratory viruses. These actions include personal protective measures for everyday use (e.g., staying home when ill, covering coughs and sneezes, and washing hands often) and communitywide measures reserved for pandemics and aimed at reducing opportunities for exposure (e.g., coordinated closures and dismissals of childcare facilities and schools and cancelling mass gatherings).

Types of School Closures and Dismissals

School closure means closing a school and sending all the students and staff members home, whereas during a school dismissal, a school might stay open for staff members while the children stay home. Keeping facilities open during a dismissal allows teachers to develop and deliver lessons and materials remotely to maintain continuity of teaching and learning and allows other staff members to continue to provide services and help with additional response efforts.

There are three types of school closure and dismissal:

- **Selective** closure or dismissal is used when all or most students in the school are at higher risk for complications once infected. For example, a school for medically-fragile children, or for pregnant students may close based on the local situation while other schools in the community may remain open.
- **Reactive** closure or dismissal is used when many students and staff are sick and are not attending school, or many students and staff are arriving at school sick and are being sent home.
- **Preemptive** closure or dismissal is the type being considered early in this COVID-19 response. This type of closure is used in a community to decrease the spread of infection before many students and staff get sick. This decision is guided by the Department of Health and based on information about the spread of COVID-19 in the region.

While any closure decision is the responsibility of the superintendent in consultation with the Secretary of Education, any decision for school closure due to COVID-19 risk should be informed by guidance from the Vermont Department of Health.

Schools that close or dismiss students as an intervention should consider cancelling or postponing after-school activities or events that bring together groups of people in order to reduce transmission of COVID-19.

Making the Decision to Close or Dismiss School

The first step for schools in situations of suspected COVID-19 is to talk with the Vermont Department of Health at (802) 863-7240 (please identify yourself as a school official and we will connect you to the appropriate staff member day or night). The Department will review each case individually and assist local decision makers and the Agency of Education with the best available public health guidance. If you do not have a suspected COVID-19 case among your students or your staff but have other concerns about COVID-19 in your community, we encourage you to consult as needed with both the Department of Health and Agency of Education about how to address those concerns at your school. Community members may be reaching out to schools about their own knowledge of student, staff or community member travel or health, but the most reliable public health information upon which to make a decision will be coming from the Health Department.

Current CDC guidance recommends the following considerations:

If an ill student or staff member attended school prior to being confirmed as a COVID-19 case:

- While local health officials have statutory authority to issue health orders concerning schools and other public places, statewide coordination is critical in the case of a COVID-19 case or outbreak. Decisions regarding preemptive school closure should be made by the superintendent upon the advice of the Commissioner of Health and Secretary of Education. Superintendents should contact the Health Department for guidance and notify the Secretary as soon as possible thereafter. Recommendations for the scope (e.g., a single school, a full district) and duration of school dismissals will be made on a case-by-case basis and reflect the most up-to-date information about COVID-19 and the specific cases in the impacted community.
- Schools should work with the Vermont Department of Health and other relevant leadership 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 and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act.

- Students and staff who are well but are taking care of or share a home with someone with a case of COVID-19 should follow instructions from the Health Department to determine whether or not to attend school.

School officials should also alert health officials about large increases in student and staff absenteeism, particularly if such absences appear due to respiratory illnesses.

Length of Closure or Dismissal

The length of time school should be closed or dismissed will vary depending on the severity of risk. School and program administrators should seek guidance from the Vermont Department of Health and the Agency of Education to determine when students and staff should return to schools and what additional steps are needed for the school community. CDC Guidelines for cleaning and disinfection can be found at [healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)

Social Isolation and Monitoring of At-Risk Students and Staff

Potential COVID-19 exposures can create situations where patients are monitored by local health officials and occasionally asked to take social isolation steps. The Vermont Department of Health currently recommends that persons who are returning from China, Iran, Italy or South Korea should stay home and monitor their health for 14 days after returning to the United States. Travelers from Japan should monitor their health for 14 days after returning to the United States.

All travelers who have returned from those countries in the last 14 days should call the Health Department epidemiology and infectious disease staff at (802) 863-7240.

Waiver of Student Attendance Days

The closure or dismissal of a school due to COVID-19 may qualify as an emergency reason under [State Board of Education Rule 2300](#) in support of a waiver request from the minimal number of student attendance days required during a school year. It is important to consult with the Secretary of Education in advance of making a school closure or dismissal decision in order to assess the qualifying emergency nature of such a decision relative to state attendance regulations.

School districts should also review their student attendance policies. A student should not be penalized for absences that are the result of following medical advice or the guidance of the Department of Health. If there are circumstances surrounding a particular individual that indicate a risk to public health, the Department of Health will provide specific guidance to the school district.

School Meals Programs

Schools may continue to provide reimbursable meals to low-income children during school closures and dismissals through the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option in the National School Lunch Program with approval from the Agency of Education's Child Nutrition Program. While these Programs typically require meals to be eaten on site, the congregate meal requirement can be waived by the USDA. The Agency of Education is in the process of requesting such a waiver. Local school officials should consult with the Agency of Education before offering reimbursable meals when a school is closed or dismissed due to COVID-19.

The Provision of Special Education and 504 Services

The Federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is currently developing formal guidance around supporting the needs of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Agency of Education anticipates that this guidance will be released during the week of March 9, 2020. In the meantime, when a school is closed due to COVID-19 and an LEA does not provide any educational services to the general student population, then an LEA would not be required to provide services to students with disabilities during that same period. If an LEA continues to provide educational opportunities to the general student population during a school closure, the school must ensure that students with disabilities also have equal access to the same opportunities, including the provision of FAPE.

Once school resumes, the LEA must make every effort to provide special education and related services to the child in accordance with the child's individualized education program (IEP) or, for students entitled to FAPE under Section 504. IEP Teams would be required to make an individualized determination as to whether compensatory services are needed to make up for any skills that may have been lost because of an extended school closure.