

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

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Dear Parents and Guardians:

First and most importantly, I hope you and your family are healthy and safe. As the commissioner of K-12 public education in the state and a parent of two public school kids, I know that these are unprecedented times, and many of you are being asked to step into unfamiliar roles. I understand the extraordinary pressure you are facing as you balance caring for children, helping them learn, and, in many cases, continuing your own work. I want to assure you that we are working hard to provide your school leaders with the necessary guidance to support students and families during these difficult times. We are all in this together, working on behalf of our children.

On March 25, the Governor announced that public and private schools in Massachusetts must remain closed for in-person instruction until Monday, May 4 in order to prevent further spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). The order does not include residential schools for students with disabilities. As we get closer to May 4, we expect to have more information about whether schools will reopen as planned.

I am writing to you today to inform you about the steps we are taking to support students while schools are closed. Your school and district leaders and teachers will be in touch with you as additional information becomes available. For now, the following may be helpful:

- **Remote Learning:** I understand that nothing can replace the in-person interaction and learning experience of being in school. All the students and educators with whom I have spoken with sorely miss learning in person as part of a community. While we do not expect remote learning to replicate the traditional school day, schools will use remote learning tools and instructional materials to develop and provide students with appropriately structured and supported ways to keep learning.

Remote learning can encompass a wide variety of learning opportunities. While technology can be a supportive tool, districts and schools should also consider ways that student learning can continue offline. This could include exploring the natural world, activities to support students' local communities (with appropriate social distancing) and engaging hands-on projects and artistic creations that stem from students' own passions and experiences.

Examples of remote learning tools include large-group video or audio conference calls, 1:1 phone or video calls, email, work packets, projects, reading lists, online learning platforms, and other resources to effectively engage with students. These tools could be used to deliver lessons, provide individual student support, provide resources (including instructional material and student assignments), connect students to each other and the teacher, and provide feedback on student work.

I also recognize that schools across the state have been operating with a variety of remote learning models for their students. We worked closely with many stakeholders to develop guidance that will serve as a

baseline model for schools to use or modify based on their unique situation. These recommendations are guided by three core beliefs:

- Health, safety, and wellness are our top priorities.
- Schools should be mindful of equity concerns and work to reduce the potential disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable populations.
- We are committed to maintaining connections between school staff and students and helping all students continue their learning

With these beliefs in mind, the recommended remote learning model highlights the following:

- We recommend that schools support students to engage in meaningful and productive learning for approximately half the length of a regular school day. We expect this learning to take place via a combination of educator-directed learning and student self-directed learning.
- We recommend that remote learning focus on reinforcing skills already taught this school year and applying and deepening those skills. We recognize, however, that in some cases, teachers and students may wish to continue with new material, particularly at the high school level. In those cases, schools should consider equity of access and support for all students.
- We recognize that the individual student experience will vary depending on student age, individual and family needs, access and capacity for remote learning (including access to technology and the internet), and the ongoing health of students, families, and staff.

Above all, I recognize that schools and teachers are best positioned to develop plans to meet their students' needs and that these needs may change over the course of this extended closure.

To further expand learning opportunities for students, we have partnered with public broadcaster [WGBH](http://www.wgbh.org) and its partner station WGBY to provide resources for use by students who are learning at home. The resources include the stations' newly launched [online distance learning center](https://www.wgbh.org/distance-learning-center) (<https://www.wgbh.org/distance-learning-center>) with lessons for every grade level and free access for educators to PBS Learning Media (<https://mass.pbslearningmedia.org/>). Middle and high school students also have access to more educational programming on the WGBH and WGBY WORLD Channel from noon to 5 p.m., and younger students can tune into other public broadcasting channels such as WGBH Kids for educational programming. Other supplemental educational resources have been posted on our [website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/ed-resources.html) (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/ed-resources.html>).

- **Required days of school:** Schools do not have to make up days that are cancelled due to the public health emergency, beyond the previously set aside five snow days. The state is not requiring any school to go beyond its previously scheduled 185th day of the school year, although each school district could decide to go longer.
- **MCAS testing:** We understand that educators, parents, and students are anxious to know more about testing. Please keep in mind that annual testing is required by both the federal and state government. At this time, we have received an initial waiver from the federal requirement and are working at the state level to explore options that are in the best interest of students. We will decide as quickly as possible about this year's tests and the Competency Determination required for high school graduation.
- **Special education:** On March 21, the U.S. Department of Education issued a [fact sheet](#) to clarify what the federal special education law requires for students with disabilities while

schools are closed in this public health emergency. In particular, the guidance made clear that schools must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities consistent with need to protect the health and safety of students, educators, and service providers. In these exceptional circumstances, special education services will be provided differently than they are when school is fully operational.

Meaningful learning opportunities and ongoing connections with teachers and service providers are vitally important for students with disabilities. During the coming weeks, schools will continue to develop and expand ways to provide special education services remotely. If your child has Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) should expect that members of your child's special education team will check in with you to help you and your child access these services.

Your child's participation in the activities and supports provided by the school will not result in changes to your child's IEP. IEP meetings are not needed in order for the school to provide services remotely. When school resumes, your child's IEP team will follow up as necessary to determine next steps in supporting your child's progress.

We encourage families, school administrators, and teachers to work together to find the best ways to support each child during this challenging time.

- **English learner education:** The Remote Learning recommendations acknowledge that equity needs to be a top consideration in local planning efforts and that districts need to support students to engage in meaningful and productive learning with the understanding that the individual student experience will vary depending on various factors. Federal civil rights laws require schools to take appropriate steps to address the language barriers that prevent English learners from meaningfully participating in their education and to support local planning. We will soon issue further guidance on ways to support English learners during the extended school closure.
- **Residential schools for students with disabilities:** The Governor's March 25 order extending school closure does not apply to residential schools for students with disabilities. These schools are consulting with local boards of health and the state Department of Public Health to make decisions about how to deal with their specific situations. We are in close communication with these schools to support the continuity of services to the maximum extent possible and to support the health and safety of students and staff.
- **School meals:** We are working with schools and other community-based organizations to help get food to students who may need it. There are over 1,000 meal sites open across the state. To find a site near you, please visit the Project Bread meal site finder online at <https://meals4kids.org/schoolclosure> or contact them by phone at 800-645-8333.

Preventing and Stopping Bullying and Harassment

COVID-19 is not at all connected to race, ethnicity, or nationality. *Bullying or harassment* related to COVID-19 that is based on actual or perceived race, color, national origin, or disability *will not be tolerated*. It may result in a violation of state and federal civil rights laws. If you believe that you or your children have experienced bullying or harassment related to the COVID-19 outbreak, or if this happens in the future, please contact your school's civil rights officer, principal or your superintendent's office. You may also contact our Problem Resolution System Office at 781-338-3700 or compliance@doe.mass.edu.

For more information, please visit the following COVID-19 websites:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (www.mass.gov/covid19)
- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/emergencyplan/covid19.html>)

Also, the National Association of School Psychologists has advice on how to talk about the virus with children (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-%28coronavirus%29-a-parent-resource>).

I know that to support our children well, we all need to maintain our own mental health. I encourage you to examine resources available to support your own health and well-being (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/maintaining-emotional-health-well-being-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>).

We will provide additional information about MCAS and graduation requirements soon. If you have questions that are not addressed here, please email us at COVID19K12ParentInfo@mass.gov or call us at (781) 338-3700.

Thank you for all you are doing to support your children during these challenging times.

Sincerely, Jeffrey C. Riley Commissioner