

School's out, but not over

Written by gallupsun
Friday, 27 March 2020 14:05

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 March 27.□

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 that an extension could be needed. It came with a new executive order that extends the closing through the end of the school year.

New Mexico had 136 confirmed positive COVID-19 cases as of March 26 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,” 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.”

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“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 continued.

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.

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.

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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

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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. The Public Education Department is also seeking permission to distribute Electronic Benefits Transfer cards that would allow qualifying families to purchase meals with their free breakfast/lunch allotment.

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

With schools closed, some children may be more vulnerable to abuse and neglect in their homes. In addition, teachers, school administrators and other school staff members are often the first to notice changes in behavior and appearance that may indicate abuse or neglect. New Mexicans must fill this void and be vigilant about the safety and well-being of children they know and those in their neighborhoods. Any citizen can report suspected child abuse or neglect by dialing #SAFE from their cell phone or by calling 1-855-333-SAFE from a land-line.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

The Behavioral Health Division of the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department is working with the New Mexico Human Services Department and managed care organizations to help providers and families create digital access to mental health services for children and youth.

COLLABORATING WITH NATIONS, TRIBES AND PUEBLOS

Tribes, pueblos, and nations are located in some of the most rural parts of New Mexico and often experience extreme health care provider shortages. The governor and state agencies are collaborating with tribal leaders to support their needs in these times.

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The following state agencies will continue working with the tribes, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Indian Education to support students who attend BIE and tribally run schools:

Indian Affairs Department

Public Education Department

Children, Youth and Families Department, and

Early Childhood Education and Care Department.

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