



Matthew L. Blomstedt, Ph.D., Commissioner

NEBRASKA

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To: Nebraska Public School Superintendents, Non-Public School Administrators, & ESU Administrators
CC: State Board of Education, Commissioner's Cabinet and NDE Leadership
RE: Important Information regarding Coronavirus COVID-19 3-23-20

Good Morning! As you know, these are the most consequential times of most of our lives. I want to do my best to ensure I am clear about the concerns for the health and well-being of all of Nebraska's residents. As you can also tell, we are not in a moment where lack of clarity is going to assist. As such, I want to further summarize and clarify some points from our statewide zoom call yesterday.

I am including links to the slides as well as to the video recording:

- Commissioner's COVID-19 Video Call 3-22-2020: [https://youtu.be/6pq\\$bmoh2Gk](https://youtu.be/6pq$bmoh2Gk)
- Slides from 3-22-2020: <https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/March-22-COVID19-Slides.pdf>

SLIDE 8 From my presentation was intended to make it clear that I recommend that **schools SHOULD NOT return to normal operations this school year**. I do not make this recommendation lightly and I make it as a "recommendation" only because I cannot "require" it. The power to mandate closures rests with the Governor and health officials. I met with all of Nebraska's local public health officials on Saturday and have been in multiple meetings with the Governor and state health officials as well. You should note, health officials and the Governor are supportive of this recommendation. This is a unique moment in time and I understand if you have doubts about the severity of this crisis. However, I do not have any doubt. I have witnessed information and discussions that make me certain about the public health risk to all of Nebraska and the nation. The unprecedented response across the country in two weeks' time shows that the crisis response continues to escalate. As UNMC's Chancellor Gold has stated, it would be best to be five minutes early than five minutes late. I hope we are in the five minutes early phase in Nebraska.

There has been much in the news about the spread and detection of this virus and unfortunately the public trust in national media and the government has eroded. Nebraska is among the few states that have taken earlier measures to prevent the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus due to thoughtful leadership at all levels. Key to that strategy is the suspension of large public gatherings (state basketball, school events, and schools themselves). There is far more to accomplish in this societal response effort but school building closure is among the recommended strategies to address this public health concern. Closing school buildings by itself is not enough. Communities, families, businesses, churches, hospitals, nursing homes, and even individual behaviors have to change to slow the spread of the virus. The rapid growth can, and likely will, overwhelm our health care providers and facilities. If, and likely when, that happens, we'll see more extreme measures as are being seen in other states and countries.

3-22-2020 SLIDE 8 content:

Commissioner's Recommendation on School Operations:

- Continuity of learning opportunities through the remainder of the school year
 - **Schools must be prepared to operate in this alternate learning environment (without students in schools) through the remainder of the 2019-20 school year.**
 - Although, everyone wants to be able to return to normal, projections and recommendations public health officials suggest that returning to school is unlikely at best AND it is likely that social distancing and restrictions are likely to persist for several weeks/months ahead.
 - Schools must be part of this messaging and approach to address public health
 - Learning opportunities for ALL students
 - Awareness of equity issues & implications (Special needs, poverty, English learner, technology gaps, other)
 - Food Security – School Meals
 - Accountability/Assessment
 - Public Gatherings and Workplace Considerations
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Your leadership matters at this moment. I know we are all grieving the loss of our normal school year. I am asking for your help to transition from that grief quickly and move to a mission of caring for the well-being of your communities, families, staff, and neighbors. Part of that well-being is to take a moment to think through the needs of your most at-risk families and populations.

1. **Address the needs of your staff and their families.** We all need to pull in the same direction. Your school operations must move to a focus on public health and messaging about limiting in-person

contact. Maintaining social distancing is important. Do not gather in groups of more than 10 people. Instead, implement alternative ways to keep in contact. Take care of your staff so they can address personal needs. I highly recommend flexible schedules and allowing staff to work from home. Staff are still allowed to go into school buildings but only with great caution and care.

2. **Address community food needs.** I know that many districts are already shifting their food distribution. If you have not yet done so please begin making meals available to your students who need them.
3. **Continuity of learning is NOT running “school as normal” in a different setting.** Today I will begin to message broadly that continuity of learning is about creating enrichment to support your students broadly. This is NOT intended to be school as normal in a different setting. I am asking that you take the pressure off your teachers and staff, and even yourselves, to provide a thoughtful enrichment program. Parallel to the enrichment program, you should be thinking about your kids and families with the greatest need, including adjusted special education services, services for students in poverty, and services for English Learner families. Again, the primary concern is the well-being of students and their families.
4. **Graduating seniors.** The most structured education concern you have should be for your senior class. They are likely capable of completing coursework and wrapping up their year so they (and you) can feel they may advance. Again, teachers generally are going to know the students who might need additional assistance. A focus on providing closure for your senior class is the one area to provide the most structure. Other classes might have structure gradually return as you are able but you should remove any pressure to do this immediately. Simply do what you can to help teachers structure lessons or facilitate student access to learning materials.
5. **Elementary Students.** I am extremely concerned for our elementary and middle school students across the state. They need to see the caring and nurturing elements of schooling more than anything else right now. AGAIN, enrichment in this environment should not look like 50-minute blocks of time structured throughout the day. Rather our best instincts and research about giving students learning objectives and letting them engage with others via electronic means will help keep a sense of connection to learning. I hope that NET can play a role in providing meaningful access to learning and enrichment. Actively reading during this time is probably among the best strategies. Schools that can create touch points with families, including food pickup, phone calls, and other outreach, will have as much positive impact, and be more productive than structured learning that likely may not work for families in need.

6. **Education rules and regulations should be your last concern.** You cannot make bad decisions right now if you are focused on the safety, well-being, and basic needs of your children and communities. Do everything you can to help protect public health, help support your families and communities, and be prepared to use your community leadership skills. Much like moments during the 2019 flooding, schools jumped at the chance to take care of one another. It was remarkable. I want you to be prepared to be remarkable in your leadership and direction. This is not a time to battle over the small stuff. Staff will be loyal to your leadership when you give them a chance to serve their communities. Everyone will need one another. Please know that I am not worried about rules and regulations. I am worried about relief and recovery that I believe will take years.
7. **All local and state partners can help.** I want to encourage everyone in the education community to work together and assist one another. Share resources, ideas, and practices with one another across public, private, and home schools. We are only going to get through this by working with one another.
8. **NDE will be interpreting laws in-the-moment and promises to work with school attorneys and special education directors through the entire process.** Please be patient as new information and dialogue is constantly being exchanged. Addressing all of the above with the utmost concern for community well-being is our best and only strategy. We are all fighting the same battle and concerned about our staff's well-being. Fortunately, we have very dedicated folks turning the corner on how we can best lead and assist others.

Education in Nebraska and across the nation will be profoundly changed by this moment, but how, I cannot tell you. Instead, I know that doing what is right for our families and communities is what will sustain us and launch us into the recovery efforts.

Please take a moment to review what is projected through this article published by *Time*: <https://time.com/5801726/coronavirus-models-forecast/> or search for other reliable media or research resources.

There are many other resources and disease experts projecting the challenges we face. I know that not everyone has the same level of concern and I will take criticism for either overreacting or under-reacting. The Governor and I had a good conversation about this yesterday. He and I are both trying to hit the right spot on this response along with many others. I support him and he is supportive of me. I ask that all of you take this as a sign that the direction we are headed is the best direction, most importantly for public health and for our well-being. I don't think you will ever see a moment in time where leadership at every level is so critical.

Thank you. There will be more information coming out and we update the NDE Coronavirus Resources webpage daily with these communications.

Matthew L. Blomstedt, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education