

# Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in K–12 Schools: *A Parent Guide*

## Background

### About COVID-19

Along with many areas around the world, Washington state is experiencing an expanding outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19). This virus can spread from person-to-person and the number of detected cases is growing. Several schools have closed operations in order to prevent further spread of the virus. The resources in this guide are intended to help parents, guardians, and families understand the school's role during a closure, commitments to students, and what making days up at the end of the school year looks like.

### State vs. Local Authority

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is the state education agency charged with overseeing and supporting Washington's 295 public school districts and seven state-tribal education compact schools. In Washington, local school districts have a great amount of decision-making authority over how their districts operate. The state often lays the foundation, and then provides districts with flexibility to meet the needs of their unique communities. The decision to close schools is regularly made by local superintendents in response to weather and other events in order to maintain the health and safety of students and staff. During a health-related outbreak, districts must close if directed to by their local health officer. Local superintendents are advised to follow the expert advice and direction of public health officials in their local communities. During this health outbreak, parents and families should look to their superintendent, local health officer, and the state Department of Health for the most current and accurate information.

## Expectations of Schools

Currently, the state expects schools and school districts to be:

1. Communicating regularly with students, families, staff, and the larger school community.
2. Practicing routine cleaning and disinfecting procedures of commonly touched surfaces.
3. Maintaining an open line of communication with their local public health officer.
4. Intentionally and persistently combatting stigma through information sharing. COVID-19 is not at all connected to race, ethnicity, or nationality.
5. Actively engaging in contingency planning for the possibility of extended school closures.

There are other expectations and considerations from OSPI as this situation unfolds. These are outlined in more detail on the pages that follow.



## Make-up Days for School Closures

If a school district closes schools in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, they should make every effort to make up missed time, including using scheduled vacation days and planned school closure days. Districts will be expected to make up as much time as they can, using those previously scheduled closure days, through Friday, June 19. For any missed time beyond June 19, OSPI will grant school districts with emergency waivers and allow them to end the school year. Please note, it is OSPI's expectation that districts will maintain their graduation timelines.

## Student Attendance

Many districts, parents, and guardians have expressed concern about student absences related to COVID-19 safety concerns. State law requires school leaders to excuse absences due to safety concerns as well as absences due to illness, a health condition, or a medical appointment. The law also provides districts with the authority to define additional categories or criteria for excused absences should the need arise. OSPI knows that community fears may be high as identified cases increase, particularly for families with loved ones living in the home who have a compromised immune system. We have directed school districts to exercise great caution before deciding not to excuse absences related to COVID-19.

## Special Education

If a district has extended school closures, the district will remain responsible for the free appropriate public education (FAPE) of its students eligible for special education services with an individualized education program (IEP). Districts should be communicating with parents and guardians prior to, during, and after a school closure regarding their child's IEP services. After an extended closure, districts are responsible for reviewing how the closure impacted the delivery of special education and related services to students eligible for special education services. Please note, if a school closure causes educational services for all students to pause within a school or district, then the school/district is generally not required to provide services to the affected students eligible for special education services during that same period of time.

## Online Learning

Most districts are not prepared to implement a distance learning model, such as online learning, on short notice. Some districts and schools may be in a position to continue teaching using distance learning methods; however, equity is a critical consideration. It is important to note that if educational services are being delivered to students in any form, in order for the district to remain open, those services must be provided to **all** students, including students who don't have access to technology at home and students receiving special education services. OSPI believes that for most districts, it will make more sense to cancel school altogether than to organize a learning model that cannot be accessed equitably by all students.

## Other Considerations

### School Meals

Continuity of food services, especially for students experiencing poverty, is an important factor that OSPI expects districts to consider before deciding to close school. School meals are largely paid for using federal funds, and there are restrictions attached that the state cannot control. OSPI is working closely with affected schools regarding options for serving meals. Check your school's communication channels for information regarding meal availability.

### Bullying and Harassment

COVID-19 is not at all connected to race, ethnicity, or nationality. School staff should be mindful that bullying, intimidation, or harassment of students based on actual or perceived race, color, national origin, or disability (including the actual disability of being infected with COVID-19 or perception of being infected) may result in a violation of state and federal civil rights laws. School districts must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate what occurred when responding to reports of bullying or harassment. If parents and families believe their child has experienced bullying, harassment, or intimidation related to the COVID-19 outbreak, they should [contact their school district's designated civil rights compliance coordinator](#).

### Notifications

If districts are experiencing school closures, it is OSPI's expectation that they follow their standard procedure for notifying parents and guardians. This includes, but is not limited to, calls, emails, text messages, and contacting local news stations. If parents and families are not hearing from their districts during a closure, they should get in touch with their school principal or district superintendent.

### Testing

Should the need arise, OSPI will work with districts on alternate scheduling or adjustments related to state tests scheduled to take place in the spring.

## More Information

The best place to find accurate, up-to-date information is the [state Department of Health website](#). The Department of Health has also established a call center to address questions from the public about COVID-19. If you have questions about what is happening in Washington, how the virus is spread, and what to do if you have symptoms, please call 1-800-525-0127 and press #.

In addition, [copies of OSPI's guidance and resources related to COVID-19](#) are available on the OSPI website. If you have questions related to the topics above, please contact OSPI at 360-725-6000 or [superintendent@k12.wa.us](mailto:superintendent@k12.wa.us).