

Joint Statement by Minnesota School Boards Association, Minnesota Association of School Administrators, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals, Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association and Education Minnesota on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in Schools

March 16, 2020

As the organizations representing Minnesota's school board members, administrators and educators, the safety of our students and school staff is our top priority. We also recognize the uncertainty and disruption COVID-19 has caused in many of our communities. In response to the many new challenges and questions this pandemic has raised, MSBA, MASA, MASSP, MESPA and Education Minnesota are collaborating to provide the following guidance to the members of our respective organizations.

1. Safety of students and staff is our first priority. The undersigned organizations applaud the March 15 [Executive Order](#) issued by Governor Walz directing the Commissioner of Education to close all Minnesota school districts and charter schools to students from Wednesday, March 18, until Friday, March 27, to allow educators and staff time to prepare for distance learning and continuity of essential services. We also appreciate that the order reduces the minimum number of instructional days in Minn. Stat. §120A.41 by the number of days in this closure period.

Some Minnesota school districts have decided to close earlier, or to close to both students and staff, due to local conditions. School districts should continue taking these additional precautions in consultation with staff, parents and local health officials.

2. Staff should remain home if they are ill, have been exposed to coronavirus or are at greater risk for infection or severe illness. Although the Executive Order directs all staff to report to work during the closure period, it also provides: "Nothing in this order should be construed to encourage or require Minnesotans in at-risk categories to take action inconsistent with public health recommendations or the advice of their doctors. All Minnesotans should continue to regularly check and follow the advice on MDH's COVID-19 [webpage](#)." (Para. 12.) Staff who are ill or need to care for family members who are ill should remain home and be eligible for paid leave, as should school employees who have been exposed to the coronavirus or who are at elevated risk due to age or a chronic health condition. Providing paid leave to staff who remain home as a preventative measure is necessary to protect the health and safety of the entire school community. With spring break happening right now for many districts, educators should follow the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) travel guidelines in deciding whether to go on a trip or what to do when they return.

3. During the closure period, school districts should follow the guidance developed by the Minnesota Department of Education. On March 15, 2020, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) released some of the most comprehensive [guidance](#) in the country regarding distance learning and continuing essential school services while school facilities are closed to students. In particular, we appreciate and share MDE's concern that all students have equitable access to meaningful and relevant learning while schools are closed. The undersigned organizations agree with and encourage their members to follow this guidance. We also hope to be partners in requesting clarification or modification of this guidance when necessary.

4. Staff should not be harmed financially in the event of school closures, distance learning or caretaking needs. During the closure period of March 18-27, the Executive Order provides that "school employees are directed to report to work in accordance with applicable labor agreements and as required by their employers to assist with the emergency management planning activities..." This includes all hourly employees, who should be fully compensated during this period.

When school districts transition to distance learning, we urge all school districts to ensure that hourly employees are not financially harmed. The Department of Education's March 15 guidance on school closures states, "Because districts and charters will be receiving full funding for providing distance learning, it is expected that all staff, including non-salaried, hourly staff, will earn pay and benefits as planned in the school budget and bargaining agreements." (p. 23.) We share this expectation, and we encourage districts to incorporate all hourly staff into distance learning plans so that they can continue supporting students. This may require districts developing new and innovative ways to enable hourly employees to work remotely.

The closure of schools will also require that many school employees will be unavailable to work due to the need to care for their own children whose schools have closed. The undersigned organizations urge school leaders to follow MDE's March 15 [FAQ](#) on school closures, specifically the recommendation that educators' children be eligible for the same school-based child care as the children of health care and emergency workers.

5. School districts should be made whole for any increased costs associated with coronavirus preparedness, response and containment efforts. Finally, in the event that school districts incur increased costs or lost revenue in order to ensure the continuity of services for all students and compensation for staff during closure and distance learning periods, the undersigned organizations call on the Legislature, MDE, and the governor to ensure that they are made financially whole. We already anticipate that the coronavirus will put a financial strain on our communities and school districts need to have confidence that their efforts to provide stability for students and staff do not harm their budgets.

The impending closure of all Minnesota schools in order to contain COVID-19 poses new and unprecedented challenges to our students, families, educators and school leaders. We greatly appreciate the efforts undertaken at all levels to respond to these challenges, and we are committed to continued collaboration in the weeks and months ahead.

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