

# School Guidance

## Answers to Common Questions

Information will be updated on this page as it's made available - please check back frequently.

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### Closed Schools

#### What schools are closed?

Under Governor Wolf's directive, all schools in Pennsylvania are closed until further notice. This includes: public K-12 schools, brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, private and parochial schools, career and technical centers (CTCs), intermediate units (IUs); and childcare centers operating within any of the aforementioned; educational programming for students in non-educational placements such as residential settings (boarding schools), residential facilities, detention centers, and hospital settings; PA Pre-K Counts, Head Start Programs and Preschool Early Intervention programs/services; and Private Academic Nursery Schools and locally funded prekindergarten activities. Additionally, postsecondary institutions have suspended in-person instruction and non-essential services.

#### How should schools with residential programs modify their programs due to closure?

The Governor's directive closing all public and private schools extends to in-person educational programming for students in non-educational placements such as residential facilities, detention centers, and hospital settings. Such programs may choose to offer continuity of education that does not involve in-person instruction in accordance with applicable standards and requirements, as addressed in other provisions of this FAQ.

### Essential Staff

#### What staff are essential?

Schools and postsecondary institutions ensure the equitable provision of multiple, life-sustaining services to students and families. Understanding that needs and service delivery vary across communities, decisions about essential staff should be made locally and in the context of [aggressive social distancingOpens In A New Window](#). Examples of essential services include, but are not limited to, administration, food preparation and distribution, housing, information technology, building maintenance, and operations (e.g., payroll).

## **180 Day School Year**

### **What are the consequences for districts/schools that don't meet the 180-day requirements?**

PDE will not penalize districts/schools that fail to meet the minimum 180-day requirements as a result of COVID-19 response efforts.

### **Recognizing that schools will not be penalized for failing to meet the minimum 180-day requirement because of COVID-19 response efforts, must schools adjust their calendars to meet those requirements?**

Given the extensive period of closure, schools are not required to adjust calendars. However, schools will be required to report their total days and hours for the 2019-20 school year on a simplified form; completed forms will be deemed approved.

## **Meals for Children**

### **How can students access meals while schools are closed?**

Pennsylvania sought and received approvals from the Federal government to allow schools the option to distribute meals to children age 18 and under at no cost while schools are closed. [Districts/schools that want to act on this Federal approval must apply to PDE](#). PDE continues to expedite approvals. Districts/schools may utilize essential staff to ensure students have access to meals. Although not required, participating schools are strongly encouraged to continue distributing and/or delivering school meals during breaks.

PDE is partnering with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, other state agencies, the American Red Cross, and public and private partners to expand these efforts.

### **Are volunteers who assist in food distribution and/or delivery to children required to have clearances under the Child Protective Services Act?**

The Child Protective Services Act requires clearances only when a volunteer has "direct volunteer contact" which is defined as "the care, supervision, guidance, or control of children and routine interaction with children." Volunteers who are distributing and/or delivering food are not in charge of the child's care, supervision, guidance, or control; as such, they do not require clearances.

## **Continuity of Education**

### **Are schools required to provide any type of instruction during the closure of schools due to COVID-19 response efforts?**

PDE strongly encourages all schools to provide some type of continuity of education for all students in the most appropriate and accessible ways possible, while also honoring the Governor's guidance for aggressive social distancing of at least six feet between individuals. Also know that evolving United States Department of Education (USDE) guidance implies that Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal protections still apply whether or not schools offer continuity of education.

Continuity of education is the broad term given to educational practices that occur in the event of a prolonged school closure. To provide a consistent and equitable foundation for this work, PDE partnered with Intermediate Units (IUs) and Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN) to develop guidance and evidence-based resources around continuity of education, and to provide technical assistance to school leaders.

### **For school entities considering continuity of education, what options are available?**

Schools may provide continuity of education through either or a combination of the following:

- **Planned Instruction:** Planned Instruction is formal teaching and learning similar to that which occurs in a classroom setting. Within this process, teachers use planned courses of instruction of new concepts/skills aligned to grade level standards.
- **Enrichment and Review:** Enrichment and Review consists of informal activities that reinforce or extend students' prior learning. New standards and skills are not addressed through Enrichment and Review.

These options can take a variety of forms, including online/digital learning opportunities; non-digital learning opportunities (e.g., materials sent home with students); and other approaches designed in partnership with local IUs and regional PATTAN centers. The decision to employ one or more of these methods is made at the local level based on feasibility, availability of resources, access and equity considerations, and in accordance with aggressive social distancing guidance.

Whatever decision is made, schools must work to meet the needs of all students, with particular attention to free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and English as a second language (ESL) services for English Learners (EL).

### **Is technical assistance available to schools to provide Continuity of Education?**

PDE, in collaboration with IUs and PATTAN, has developed support and guidance systems to assist schools with developing and implementing Continuity of Education plans during the COVID-19 closures. This support will be provided by the 29 intermediate units across the commonwealth and is available beginning March 24. School leaders can access materials by visiting the [PATTAN website](#) Opens In A

[New Window](#) and may request district/school-specific guidance and support by contacting their local Intermediate Unit.

### **What free resources are available to support school communities in providing continued instruction to students?**

On March 31, [PDE released a collection of free statewide resources](#) that are intended to help all schools that want to use them, including those not currently offering online platforms, those requiring additional technology support, and those that may rely on traditional methods to continue educating students. In addition, PDE is offering equity grants for schools to purchase computer equipment or provide instructional materials.

### **Is a K-12 school or Preschool Early Intervention (EI) Program required to continue to provide FAPE to students with disabilities during a school closure caused by COVID-19 response efforts?**

Guidance continues to evolve on this matter. Given this, PDE advises schools and EI programs to make every effort to provide some type of continuity of education for all students in the most appropriate and accessible ways possible. In so doing, schools and EI programs also need to ensure consideration for the provision of FAPE for students with disabilities and appropriate accommodations for English learners that are reasonable and appropriate based on student need and current circumstances.

In addition, districts and schools must ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, each student with a disability can be provided the special education and related services identified in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.

Once school resumes, a child's IEP team (or appropriate personnel under Section 504) must make an individualized determination whether and to what extent compensatory services may be needed, consistent with applicable requirements, including to make up for any skills that may have been lost during the closure within a reasonable timeframe.

### **Special Education Services**

PDE's Bureau of Special Education will provide additional details and updated information directly to Local Education Agency (LEA) Special Education Directors.

### **Are LEAs (School Districts, Charter Schools, Cyber Charter Schools, IUs, CTCs, etc.) required to meet IDEA timelines for evaluations, re-evaluations, IEP meetings, and reporting?**

LEAs should make every effort to meet federally- and state-mandated timelines including through virtual means or teleconferences to the extent appropriate and available. Typical practices should be followed to the maximum extent possible, which includes ensuring parents and/or guardians are provided with the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

USDE released the following guidance concerning IEP meetings, evaluations, and re-evaluations during the COVID-19 closure: *IEP teams are not required to meet in person while schools are closed. If an evaluation of a student with a disability requires a face-to-face assessment or observation, the evaluation would need to be delayed until school reopens. Evaluations and re-evaluations that do not require face-to-face assessments or observations may take place while schools are closed, so long as a student's parent or legal guardian consents. These same principles apply to similar activities conducted by appropriate personnel for a student with a disability who has a plan developed under Section 504, or who is being evaluated under Section 504.* [USDE: Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students \(March 16, 2020\). Opens In A New Window](#)

### **Can LEAs provide enrichment or review activities for students with disabilities?**

Yes. Although not required, LEAs are strongly encouraged to provide enrichment or review activities to all students. If provided, enrichment or review activities must be made available and accessible to all students.

### **If LEAs are providing instruction during COVID-19 response efforts, how should they respond to IEPs that they are unable to implement as written?**

Special education or related services may need to be adjusted through the IEP process. IEP teams should work to ensure that students are receiving appropriate services during the COVID-19 mandatory closure and ensuring alignment with aggressive social distancing guidelines. The mode of delivery might include schoolwork, packets, online learning, or some other appropriate learning adapted to the student's needs and individual situation. LEAs should continue to follow local policies regarding changing or amending an existing IEP.

According to previous guidance from the USDE Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), if an LEA continues to provide instruction to the general school population during an extended closure due to a disaster, but is not able to provide services to a student with a disability in accordance with the student's IEP, the student's IEP team determines which services can be provided to appropriately meet the student's needs.

### **If school is closed for an extended period, should IEP teams convene to examine the extent to which FAPE was or was not provided during the closure?**

LEAs are responsible for reviewing how the closure has impacted the delivery of special education and related services to students eligible for special education services. Once school resumes, a child's IEP team (or appropriate personnel under Section 504) must make an individualized determination whether, and to what extent, compensatory services may be needed, consistent with applicable requirements, including to make up for any skills that may have been lost during the closure within a reasonable timeframe.

## **Early Intervention**

## **Will Preschool Early Intervention (EI) services be offered while schools are closed?**

EI programs should suspend all services to children and families in alignment with public K-12 closures. If the Preschool Early Intervention administrative offices are open while EI services are suspended, referrals to EI should continue to be managed by the program; once services resume, referrals can proceed.

## **Pre-K Counts/Head Start**

### **Will the 180-day requirement waiver given to public schools also apply to Pre-K Counts (PKC) and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs (HSSAP)?**

Yes.

### **Will payments continue to flow for PKC and HSSAP, whether open or closed?**

Yes, PKC and HSSAP payments will continue to be made and will adhere to allowable grant expenditure and payment policies.

### **Can PKC and HSSAP programs continue to operate during the COVID-19 restrictions?**

Yes, but only to serve children of employees of [life-sustaining businesses and services identified by the PA Department of Community and Development](#)[Opens In A New Window](#).

To continue operating, [programs must apply for a waiver](#)[Opens In A New Window](#). PKC and HSSAP programs may continue to operate while waiver consideration is pending.

### **Are all PKC and HSSAP programs able to apply for a waiver?**

No. While schools remain closed, PKC and HSSAP programs physically located inside school buildings must adhere to school closure requirements and may not re-open until those school buildings re-open. Parents/caregivers who employed by life-sustaining business and need care for their children may contact their local Early Learning Resource center for assistance finding a suitable childcare alternative. [View Early Learning Resource Center contact information](#).

### **If a PKC and HSSAP program is closed, whether by choice or by mandate, may staff apply for Unemployment Compensation?**

Since payments will continue to programs without interruption, the expectation is that program-funded staff will continue to be paid during closures and placed on administrative-type leave staff should not be expected to use sick time for COVID-19-

related closures. Lead agencies with partners must pass through the agreed upon payments to their partners.

## Transportation

**Are public school entities required to continue nonpublic school transportation services while those public schools are closed during COVID-19 response efforts?**

No. To further the Commonwealth's social distancing guidance, public schools will not provide any transportation services.

## Statewide Assessments

**What's the status of the 2019-20 statewide assessments given the statewide closure of schools?**

[On March 19, the Secretary of Education cancelled all Pennsylvania System of School Assessment \(PSSA\) testing and Keystone exams](#) for the 2019-20 school year as a result of COVID-19. This cancellation includes the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA). On March 20, [the USDE approved Pennsylvania's request to waive all Federal assessment, accountability, and reporting requirements for the 2019-20 school year.](#)

[On March 23, the Secretary also cancelled standardized testing for students in career and technical education \(CTE\) programs](#) for the 2019-20 school year. These include exams from the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) and National Institute of Metalworking Skills (NIMS).

## Student Teaching

**Will PDE waive field experience requirements for teacher candidates?**

The Wolf Administration is working with the General Assembly to provide the Secretary with authority to adjust field experience and other requirements impacted by school or educator preparation program closures resulting from COVID-19 response efforts.

## K-12 Enrollment

**Are LEAs responsible for enrolling students within five days of when a child attempts to enroll while schools are closed or not providing instruction due to COVID-19 response efforts?**

No. During the time an entire LEA is closed or not providing instruction due to the unprecedented COVID-19 response efforts, an LEA is not responsible for enrolling children within five days.



Once an LEA (or any schools within the LEA) reopens or resumes instruction, the LEA should permit any child to attend school or participate in instruction on the next school day after the day on which the child is presented for enrollment, and in all cases within five (5) business days of the LEA's receipt of the required documentation as set forth in the [Enrollment of Students BEC](#).

PDE recognizes that some students and families may move during the closure and encourages LEAs to open lines of communication with those families to ensure an efficient process when schools reopen.

## **Federal Programs**

### **How are federal programs effected by COVID-19?**

[Access guidance, updates, and information on Title IA, the Migrant Education Program, Perkins Grant, ELECT, and more.](#)

## **School Construction**

### **Must school districts seek a formal exemption through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) to continue construction projects?**

School districts should use best judgment in exercising their authority to continue critical construction projects, and should not seek a formal exemption through DCED. All school district construction decisions should appropriately balance public health and safety while ensuring the continued safety of critical infrastructure. School districts and the contractors must ensure continuance of and compliance with the social distancing and other mitigation measures to protect employees and the public, including virtual and telework operations (e.g. work from home) as the primary option when available, as have been or will be established by the Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In-person work is only to be performed on the most limited basis possible.

## **Graduation Requirement**

### **Can current seniors graduate at the end of the 2019-20 school year?**

Yes. LEAs are responsible to ensure that the students anticipated to graduate in Spring 2020 graduate on time. No student should be restricted from completing their high school graduation requirements or pursuit of a post-secondary pathway due to the pandemic of 2020.

### **What academic requirements will be required of current seniors in the 2019-20 school year?**



Establishing and calculating credits for coursework is the responsibility of each LEA. If graduating seniors have not completed their classes for the year due to the closure, illness, family illness, or related COVID-19 issues, the Department suggests the LEA use discretion to determine whether the students have completed sufficient course content to satisfy the LEA's established policy for course completion and academic proficiency. The Department recommends that LEAs provide all reasonable latitude for students to graduate on time.

### **How should LEAs address graduation for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) anticipated to graduate in Spring 2020?**

Title 22, Chapter 4 of the Pennsylvania Code, 22 Pa. Code Chapter 4 (Chapter 4), and local policies continue to govern graduation requirements for students with IEPs. A student with disabilities may graduate one of two ways; either through the fulfillment of high school graduation requirements set forth in Chapter 4 or upon the completion of their IEP goals, as determined by the IEP team. IEP teams may meet virtually to consider the impact of the COVID-19 school closure and make determinations considering each student's circumstances.

### **Can a student who is enrolled in a CTC or other approved CTE program graduate if they are unable to take the NOCTI, NIMS or an industry-based competency assessment due to the statewide closure of schools?**

Yes, a student enrolled in any approved CTE program may graduate without taking or passing their associated industry-based competency assessment. A CTE Concentrator may graduate if they have demonstrated a high likelihood of success on an approved industry-based competency assessment or readiness for continued meaningful engagement in the CTE Concentrator's program of study as demonstrated by performance on benchmark assessments, course grades and other factors consistent with the CTE Concentrator's goals and career plan. The Department recommends that LEAs provide all reasonable latitude for CTE Concentrator's to graduate on time.

### **Should GPAs or class rank be modified this year?**

Calculation of class rank and GPA are a local decision made by each LEA. If an LEA chooses to use pass/fail grades, it will need to be addressed in the local grading policy. Prior to amending any policies, LEAs should consider how the change may impact students' ability to enroll in postsecondary institutions after graduation or pursue other postsecondary pathways, including apprenticeships and employment.

### **How might COVID-19 related school closures impact high school transcripts?**

This is an LEA decision. LEAs may want to consider noting on student transcripts that courses were abbreviated or grading policies were amended for the 2019-20 school year as a result of the pandemic to mitigate students' ability to enroll in postsecondary

institutions after graduation or pursue other postsecondary pathways, including apprenticeships and employment.

### **How will schools distribute Scholarships/Academic Awards?**

Distribution of Scholarships and Academic Awards is an LEA decision. LEAs should continue to engage Institutions of Higher Education and other outside agencies who provide student scholarships to ensure that the class of 2020 has access to the same financial assistance that would have been afforded them if the COVID-19 related school closures had not occurred. School counselors should be pro-active in sharing information on enrollment and financial aid with students and their families.

### **Should schools hold high school graduation ceremonies and traditional end of school year activities?**

Schools may hold virtual high school graduation and other traditional end of school year ceremonies during the COVID-19 closure. The safety and security of all students and school community are a priority for the commonwealth and all chief school administrators. Currently, restrictions on gatherings larger than ten people and aggressive social distancing recommendations are in place across the commonwealth. When closure restrictions are lifted by the Governor, LEAs may consider the appropriateness of holding such gatherings.

As of March 31, 2020, the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) has continued to postpone both the winter sports championships and the opening of spring sports. Decisions regarding winter and spring sports will be made as further information becomes available. Check the [PIAA website](#) Opens In A New Window for the most current information.