

March 14, 2020

Dear School Board Members, Superintendents, Principals and Independent School Heads of School:

Thank you for your work to date in managing the COVID-19 crisis. There is no doubt this is an unusual and concerning time for boards, administrators, teachers, parents and students.

It is essential that we model the calm, compassionate leadership that the Governor has called for in this moment of service.

That means decisions like how we approach school closures need to be coordinated, based on facts, sound science, and most importantly in a case like this, what is going to be most effective in our overall effort to protect Vermonters.

Put more clearly, we need to make decisions based on what is most effective in mitigating the spread *and* impact of the virus. Accordingly, our decisions should be based on the recommendations of the state's best medical, public health and emergency response experts.

Districts should be urged, strongly, to think clearly and carefully about the guidance from the Vermont Department of Health and impact of school closures on overall response.

Here are some important points local districts should consider:

- Based on the best available public health science, data and assessments specific to COVID-19 closing schools in Vermont at this time is not recommend by the Vermont Department of Health. Again, this recommendation is based on the best available information and expertise.
- Closing our schools and childcare centers immediately would negatively, and in some areas severely, impact the ability of healthcare workers and others to report to work at a time when we need them making critical preparations.
- As we all know, there are also many students who have special, often significant, needs or who rely on school for much of their food. We should not close schools until there are effective plans in place to meet the needs of these students.

The Governor has issued an [executive order](#) establishing a range of provisions to mitigate spread and each measure is informed by experts and science, and considers the overall strategy of the state and its communities in the response. We all have to prioritize and coordinate decisions based on what is going to be most effective in the overall response – this is very important.

In his executive order, the Governor also directs me to lead contingency planning for



school closures in Vermont – this work is well underway – and has waived all penalties for truancy, so parents are free to keep their children out of school if they choose to do so.

At this time, I recommend you plan for the possibility of the prolonged, preemptive closure of the schools in your district. The decision to close schools will be made with as much advance notice as possible, but we all recognize that this may occur quickly based on the best science and the guidance of the best public health experts we have in Vermont.

Here's the bottom line: A coordinated approach to school closure – and it will likely be necessary to have school closures as part of the overall response – is essential to ensuring these closures are as effective as possible in mitigating the impact of the virus. We must not let fear lead to decisions that impair the ability of the healthcare system to prepare and respond, or to decisions that leave some students behind.

We need to work together, across all systems and levels of government. And, as Vermonters have proven time and again, when we work together there is no challenge we cannot meet.

Sincerely,



Daniel M. French, Ed.D.
Secretary of Education

