

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

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## **About COVID-19**

Although there are no confirmed cases of respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Alabama, this virus can spread from person-to-person and the number of detected cases across our country is growing. The resources in this guide are intended to help parents, guardians, and families understand the school's role during a closure and commitments to students.



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## State vs. Local Authority

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) is the state education agency charged with overseeing and supporting Alabama's 142 public school districts and 1,470 schools. In Alabama, 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, the ALSDE works in consultation with the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) to determine school closures.

Local superintendents are advised to follow the expert advice and direction of public health officials. In the event of a health outbreak, parents and families should look to their superintendent for the most current and accurate information.

## Expectations of Schools

*Currently, the state expects schools districts to be:*

1. Communicating regularly with students, families, staff, and the larger school community. Districts should follow standard procedure for notifying parents and guardians. This includes, but is not limited to, calls, emails, and text messages.
2. Practicing enhanced school cleaning and disinfecting procedures.
3. Maintaining open lines of communication within their district and with ALSDE and ADPH.
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.
6. Encouraging students and staff to use "respiratory etiquette" through education and provision of supplies.
7. Encouraging preventative actions such as staying at home when sick.

## Student Attendance and Make-Up Days for School Closure

Many districts, parents, and guardians have expressed concern about student absences related to COVID-19 safety concerns. Standards for mandatory and enforceable attendance in Alabama requires school leaders to excuse absences such as illness or other health conditions. Within certain parameters, the law also provides districts with the authority to define additional categories or criteria for excused absences should the need arise. ALSDE knows that community fears may be high as identified cases increase, but we do not believe healthy students should be excluded from school or school activities so long as it is safe and appropriate.

In accordance with state law, if the Governor declares a state of emergency, districts will not be required to make up school days within the window of a state of emergency. Each school is expected to have at least 1080 hours of instruction during the 2019-2020 school year. Please note, it is ALSDE's expectation that districts will maintain their graduation timelines.

## 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, access to those services must be equally provided, including to students who don't have access to technology at home and students receiving special education services. 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.

## Testing

Should the need arise, ALSDE 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 symptoms or exposure, call 1-800-338-8374.**

In addition, copies of ALSDE's guidance and resources related to COVID-19 are available on the ALSDE website.

**If you have questions related to the topics above, contact ALSDE State School Nurse, Jennifer Ventress, at 334-268-0133 or [jventress@alsde.edu](mailto:jventress@alsde.edu).**