

Remote Learning Recommendations During COVID-19 School Closures

Following the Governor's announcement that schools will remain closed and not re-open before May 4, 2020, we are issuing additional guidance regarding district and school remote learning plans.

Throughout the initial weeks of this crisis, our educational community has prioritized the health, safety, and wellness of students, families, educators, and staff. At the same time, districts and schools across the Commonwealth have been operating with various remote learning models for their students, with significant variation from one to the next.

With the extension of this closure, we believe students, families, educators, and staff in all communities will benefit from the clarity of state-wide recommendations as they continue to support their students during this crisis. In developing these recommendations, DESE consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts Parent Teacher Association.

Below, we have developed a short set of guiding principles for our priorities as an educational community in the coming weeks, as well as specific recommendations regarding remote learning.

Remote learning cannot replace students' experiences in school communities with their teachers, administrators, and support staff. All of the students and educators with whom I have spoken this week sorely miss learning in person as part of a community. That said, we must all pull together – parents and caregivers, students, the community, and of course our educators and staff – to help students continue their learning over this extended period.

Please note that the guidance below is a set of *recommendations* and does not constitute a requirement for any district or school. We encourage districts and schools to view the remote learning guidance below as a baseline or starting point, which they can modify in collaboration with local stakeholders to fit their unique contexts, capacities and needs. We expect that you will customize our recommendations for individual districts and schools and for individual students within them.

We will continue to issue guidance to support districts and schools in their implementation of remote learning, including specific recommendations related to students with disabilities, English learners, and high school students. We will also send a letter to families that reflects the content in this memo.

I understand that superintendents, principals, educators and other school staff, and families are working hard to support students during these difficult times and are responding to evolving conditions with remarkable care, flexibility, and creativity. Thank you for your tireless work on behalf of our students.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner of Elementary & Secondary Education

I. Guiding Principles: Supporting Student Learning and Holistic Needs

Districts and schools must continue to focus on the holistic needs of the educational community:

- **The safety and well-being of students, families, and staff has been and must continue to be our top priority as an educational community.** We are focused not only on physical health, safety and nutrition, but also on social-emotional and mental health needs, which could intensify during this time.
- **This crisis disproportionately affects our most vulnerable students in terms of their physical and mental health and also academically. Equity needs to be a top consideration in local planning efforts, especially as districts and schools make plans to manage an extended closure.** To support these efforts, DESE will issue further guidance on how best to support special populations, including students with disabilities and English learners.
- **Maintaining connections between school staff and students is paramount, particularly for the most vulnerable members of our school communities.** These connections will provide natural conduits to guide districts and schools in addressing students' specific needs.

At this time, districts and schools must also work to adopt a remote learning model:

- **Nothing can replace the in-person schooling experience, and we should not expect that remote learning can replicate the traditional school day.**
- **At the same time, with school closures now extended, districts, schools, and communities have an obligation to engage students in meaningful and productive learning opportunities through an appropriately structured educational program.**
- **Remote learning is not synonymous with online learning. Remote learning can take place in a multitude of ways,** including by helping students engage with resources in their everyday lives and in the natural world around them. Remote learning also provides unique opportunities to further engage students in the arts or interdisciplinary work. Finally, we must be conscious of the effects of increased screen time and seek balance between learning through technology and remote learning that happens offline to support students' curiosity and understanding.

II. Specific Guidance on Developing and Implementing Remote Learning

Planning for and implementing a remote learning model:

- **If districts/schools have not already developed a remote learning model, they should take time to engage in a thoughtful planning period** with local stakeholders in order to launch in early April. This planning should include an assessment of the district's or school's capacity and resources to support a remote learning model.
- **Some districts and schools have already implemented remote learning plans, particularly those that have previously developed capacity to shift learning to a remote model.** We strongly encourage all districts and schools to consider the recommendations in this guidance document, but ultimately, we recognize that individual districts and schools maintain local authority to design their remote learning models as they see fit.
- **Above all, we recognize that districts, schools, and teachers are best positioned to develop plans to meet their students' needs, and that these needs may change over the course of this extended closure.**

Recommended remote learning model:

- **We recommend that districts support students to engage in meaningful and productive learning for approximately half the length of a regular school day. We expect this learning to take place via a combination of educator directed learning and student self-directed learning.**
- **We strongly recommend that districts and schools focus on reinforcing skills already taught this school year and applying and deepening these skills.** We recognize that in some cases, teachers and students may wish to continue with new material, particularly at the high school level. In these cases, districts should consider equity of access and support for all students.
- **The individual student experience will vary** depending on student age, individual and family needs, access and capacity for remote learning (including access to technology and internet), and the ongoing health of students, families, and staff.

Definition and scope of remote learning:

- **Remote learning can encompass a wide variety of learning opportunities.** While technology can be a supportive tool, districts and schools should also consider ways that student learning can continue offline. This could include exploring the natural world, activities to support students' local communities (with appropriate social distancing), and engaging hands-on projects and artistic creations that stem from students' own passions and experiences.¹
- **Examples of remote learning tools include large group video or audio conference calls, 1:1 phone or video calls, email, work packets, projects, reading lists, online learning platforms, and other resources to effectively engage with students.** These tools could be used to deliver lessons, provide individual student support, provide resources (including instructional material and student assignments), connect students to each other and the teacher, and provide feedback on student work. Districts and schools should ensure all online learning platforms meet confidentiality and student privacy standards.

Components of a remote learning schedule:

- We recommend the following routine and structure for remote learning, recognizing the need for flexibility for individual districts and individual students within them:
 1. **Opportunity to connect with one or more educators multiple times per week.** For students who are at higher risk of learning loss, such as students with disabilities or English learners, we recommend that educators provide additional connection opportunities.
 2. **Access to multiple hours per day of academic content directed by educators,** which should focus on reinforcing skills already taught this school year and applying and deepening those skills.
 3. **Time each day for physical activity** based on recommendations from educators.
 4. **Additional daily time for enrichment activities such as the arts** (dance, media arts, music, theater, visual arts).

Feedback on student work and grading:

- **To the extent practicable, teachers should provide feedback on student work completed at home. That said, if districts and schools have not already implemented policies regarding credit-bearing courses (determining credit for academic work at home), we strongly recommend that academic content be graded as “credit/no credit”** so as to incentivize continuous learning while acknowledging the challenging situation we face. Non-credit bearing

¹ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/16/remember-online-learning-isnt-the-only-way.html>

courses, such as those for elementary and middle school students, could incorporate other incentives to keep students motivated to continue their learning.

- Before moving forward with any determinations of “no credit,” we strongly urge districts and schools to consider whether the students have had equitable access to learning opportunities during this closure, keeping in mind the variety of technology, health, disability and language challenges that could occur.

We are grateful for educators’ continued dedication to their students and for caregivers who have embraced the challenges of helping students learn at home. We are all juggling unusual responsibilities. Although remote learning is new and challenging, we believe that students will benefit both from engaging with their caring school community and from continuing to learn.