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# OFFICE OF STRATEGIC OUTREACH

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## Back-to-School FAQs

*Updated: July 23, 2020*

### A note to our community

Thank you for your commitment and concern for how to preserve and protect the safety and well-being of our children, families, and colleagues. We understand there are a lot of questions about what the new public health updates mean for school reentry. The New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) will continue to prioritize the health and safety of our students, families, and staff as we prepared for reentry. In doing so, we will continue to follow the advice of public health officials. The delay of in-person learning allows time for New Mexicans to continue to slow the spread of COVID-19 by adhering to the public health order, and for schools to secure additional PPE, communicate their plans and safety procedures, and provide additional training to educators. **While the [reentry guidance](#) published in June will not change, there are some critical updates to keep in mind:**

1. **Districts and schools may choose to begin remote learning opportunities as early as August 3, 2020.** Schools may adjust their calendars to maximize in-person learning, if they so choose.
2. **Districts and schools may begin a phased-in, hybrid approach on or after September 8, 2020.** The phased approach will prioritize in-person learning for elementary students, gradually building to welcoming middle and high school students, as it is determined safe to do so.
3. **Exceptions to the in-person delay include small group instruction for students receiving special education** or early intervention (specifically those in need of support with literacy) services.
4. **Schools must still follow the [requirements for reentry](#).** The reentry guidance document published by PED is intended to serve as a framework for our districts and schools as they craft plans for school reentry that meet the unique needs and experiences of their communities, while keeping children, families, educators, and communities safe and healthy.
5. **The PED will establish virtual professional development for districts and charter schools.** The offerings will come at no cost to schools and will include targeted support, resources, and guidance for educators and families as we prepare for the remote and hybrid learning models.

### Contact Information

Health-related inquiries: 1-855-600-3453

PED Back-to-School Hotline: 1-833-415-0567

Educator inquiries: [Teacher.Liaison@state.nm.us](mailto:Teacher.Liaison@state.nm.us)

Family & community inquiries: [Family.Engagement@state.nm.us](mailto:Family.Engagement@state.nm.us)

### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

#### **Who makes decisions about public school during a global pandemic?**

The NM Department of Health (NMDOH) and Governor's office determine health orders and guidelines for the state. Because New Mexico public education exercises "local control," school districts and charter schools will make decisions to fit the needs of their communities. By distributing the back-to-school guidance, the PED has set up a framework within which local educational agencies (LEAs) are

building their plans. The substance of these plans will deal with local issues, given the general authority of school boards to determine local policies regarding education of students in public schools. We encourage you to reach out to your school's administration for additional details.

### **How do I know what category my school or district is in?**

Schools are placed in a category based on analysis of the available health data and under guidance of the Medical Advisory Team. The PED has identified three categories for school reentry: Remote, Hybrid, Full Reentry. To begin the school year, all schools will begin in the remote category through Labor Day. At that point, elementary schools will be eligible to move into hybrid learning, followed by middle schools and high schools, as long as public health conditions allow for this. The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) and the Medical Advisory Team will continue to monitor the spread of the virus during school reentry. Our preference is to move together as a state if the data supports general advancement toward a safe, full reentry, but if an individual region's data suggests that reentry would be unsafe for students, educators, school personnel and the community, that specific region will be monitored until numbers improve and we can ensure a safe return for that region. Our modeling data has informed us that a phased-in, hybrid model is one of the safest ways to mitigate the spread of the virus.

### **Will schools be ordered to shut down based on rates of COVID spread in surrounding regions, or just based on COVID cases in the schools?**

DOH will work with school leaders to determine the appropriate course of action when a case is identified. In some circumstances only a classroom or wing of a school may need to be closed (for example, if an individual with COVID only had access to a single classroom or wing). In other circumstance, a full closure of the school will be necessary. The response will be tailored to the circumstances of the school. If public health officials determine that virus spread conditions necessitate a regional closure, then larger scale closures would be necessary.

### **What socio-emotional supports are available to me/my students/my family?**

There are a number of resources available to students and families as we return to school. The PED has included a list of social emotional learning resources in the [guidance document](#) (pp. 7-8), and encourages schools to recognize and attend to trauma and grief that students, families, and educators may be facing. Please reach out to your school counselor, family engagement coordinator, or community schools coordinator for additional information about local resources. Additionally, School-Based Health Centers (SBHC) are a great source for public health information and support. For more information and guidance on finding a local SBHC, please click [here](#). Finally, the New Mexico Crisis Access Line is available 24/7 at 1-855-NMCRISIS (1-855-662-7474) and you can download the [NMConnect](#) app on your iPhone or Android.

### **I'm a school employee. Do I have to use my sick leave if I become ill with the coronavirus?**

The PED understands the importance of keeping our educators safe and informed. The federal government has developed the FFCRA, or the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#), which requires certain employers to provide their employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19. We encourage educators to reach out to their local Human Resources department for information on how their district is implementing the FFCRA.

### **What about childcare?**

We understand the burden that having children out of school places on families. and The PED is also working in collaboration with the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) and the

Child, Youth, and Family Division (CYFD) to address childcare, and you will be able to review additional guidance and resources soon. Once published, we encourage you to review the information provided and consult with your employer and child's school district for additional considerations and local resources. We also encourage districts to work with their communities to prioritize attendance and explore childcare options.

- **Please call the Childcare Resource and Referral line at 1-800-691-9067 for additional information.**
- You can download a childcare assistance application [here](#).
- You can explore additional resources [here](#).

**You can learn more about the Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) provider program by calling 1-833-551-0518.** Temporary FFN providers may be eligible to receive child care assistance. They will be required to complete a background check as well as complete a three-hour online health and safety training and an online CPR training.

### **What about Special Education?**

Special education services are expected to continue as stated in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In a Remote or Hybrid model, schools are encouraged to allow small groups of students with disabilities to access the school building in order to receive small group or individualized in-person services. The PED will continue to provide guidance and publish additional resources soon. If you have additional questions about special education, please visit our FAQ on special education [here](#).

### **What about student assessments?**

At this time, the US Department of Education has NOT said states will be able to waive or forego testing requirements in Spring 2021. PED is currently working toward an anticipated assessment schedule as announced in the current 2020-21 statewide assessment calendar. Any changes or variations to these plans will be announced promptly. Until then, please know the current calendar remains in effect.

### **Will there be changes to teacher evaluations?**

The Educator Growth and Development Bureau is working on additional guidance and updates regarding this matter and information from the PED Leadership Team will be forthcoming. During the spring of 2020, a task force of 46 individuals convened to make recommendations on developing a new system for the state of New Mexico. This report can be found on the Educator Growth and Development webpage of PED. Please continue to check the reentry webpage for guidance.

### **I'm a parent or caregiver. What if my child(ren) don't have access to the internet or a learning device at home?**

All districts and charter schools have been encouraged to invest federal and local funds to ensure that every student has a digital device and, if needed, a mobile hotspot or other support for internet connectivity. In addition, schools, and districts are encouraged to provide internet accessible areas such as school parking lots or bus stops, to download information and assignments. Internet service – if available in your area – can be arranged for \$9.95/month (<https://www.internetessentials.com/>). Furthermore, printable learning materials should be offered, when needed and appropriate.