



AVOCA

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Central School District



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March 14, 2020

Dear Parents and Guardians:

At 1:00 pm. today Steuben County issued the following declaration closing all schools within Steuben County through the end of spring break:

Steuben County has declared a State of Emergency in response to COVID-19 effective 12 am Wednesday, March 18th.

Steuben County Manager Jack Wheeler and Public Health Director Darlene Smith have met with school superintendents to develop a unified plan for an extended dismissal of students. Governor Cuomo, through his executive order of March 13th, placed authority for school dismissal at the local level, and these actions are taken as a precaution to be standardized across the county.

Steuben County officials have directed schools in Steuben County to dismiss students beginning March 18th through April 12th.

Schools in Steuben County will be utilizing Monday the 16th and Tuesday the 17th to prepare staff and students for this extended dismissal.

In the interim, Steuben County officials are continuing to monitor and respond to all COVID-19 concerns and remain in close communication with school districts.

“Continuing our collective efforts of ‘social-distancing’, we have directed an extended dismissal of schools in Steuben County” said Smith. “School dismissal is an effective public health measure to prevent and slow the transmission of COVID-19.”

County officials stress that these measures are precautionary in nature and there remains zero positive cases in the county.

“We urge the citizens to rely upon facts provided by health officials and not to default to undue fear,” said Wheeler. “This declaration follows suit of many counties in New York and states across the nation, which is meant to support social-distancing efforts. While our daily routines may change in the short-term, we will respond in a calm, unified manner as a community.”

Although there are no confirmed cases of coronavirus in the school district, we feel that this is the most proactive and prudent action available to us. This dismissal is necessary to help limit the spread of illness and to provide time for agencies to further assess the situation.

While the lack of precedence for this type of situation makes it difficult to know exactly what questions may arise, listed below are what I anticipate to be some of the primary questions and concerns:

- **What is the plan for Monday, March 16th and Tuesday, March 17th?**

To prepare for this extended closure, Monday, March 16th will now be a Superintendent's Conference day. Students will not attend. This day will be utilized by teachers to prepare materials for the extended dismissal.

Classes will resume for one day with students on Tuesday, March 17th. This day will allow teachers to distribute materials to students and otherwise prepare students for an extended educational experience at home. We are currently working with GST BOCES on a plan for our students who attend programs on any of the BOCES campuses.

- **What will this educational experience look like during this extended dismissal?**

Teachers will prepare alternative plans that will provide educational activities the students can complete at home. These materials will primarily review instruction the students have already learned in school in an attempt to avoid academic regression. Since we understand that Avoca Central School serves a diverse community with varied levels of access to technology, paper copies of these alternative educational plans will be made available to all students on Tuesday, March 17th.

To provide additional educational opportunities, we will also be updating our school website with available online programs and platforms. Furthermore, students in ACE (college-credit) courses may be asked to continue instruction through the Zoom platform during the dismissal.

- **What about students who attend placements outside of the district?**

These students will not attend school during the period of dismissal.

- **What will occur with athletics during the extended dismissal?**

All athletic practices and contests are canceled beginning Monday, March 16th. At this point in time, we do not know what this means for the spring sports season. We will, however, continue to keep students and parents informed of any new information we receive.

- **Will schools be required to make-up these missed days?**

The New York State Education Department continues to work with the governor's office, the New York State Department of Health, and the U.S. Department of Education to provide guidance to our schools around issues such as instructional time and the 3-8 ELA testing scheduled for the end of March. At this point in time, Governor Cuomo has waived the 180 school day requirement for all districts statewide. We have not received any guidance on what this extended dismissal means for 3-8 ELA and math testing or the Regents exams scheduled for June.

- **Will any sort of food service be available during the extended dismissal?**

We have worked with GST BOCES to develop a plan to provide some level of food service to students during this time period. The school cafeteria will begin lunch and breakfast meal deliveries on Wednesday, March 18th. These meals will consist of a bagged lunch and a bagged breakfast for the following morning. We are anticipating distributing meals at multiple locations throughout the district. More information such as the exact locations and times will be available to students and families in the next few days.

- **What resources are available to help me speak to my child about the situation?**

Every child is different, so an approach that works well for one student may not work well for another. In an effort to provide some general guidelines, attached is a document from the *National Association of School Psychologists* with suggestions on how to speak with your child about the outbreak.

While I realize that this is an unprecedented and potentially frightening time for students and their families, please understand that this decision was made solely out of concern for the safety and well-being of our students. It is this concern that will continue to drive my decision-making process over the next few weeks. As new information becomes available, we will continue to distribute that information to the entire school community.

Sincerely,



Stephen Saxton
Superintendent of School

February 29, 2020

Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus) A Parent Resource

A new type of coronavirus, abbreviated COVID-19, is causing an outbreak of respiratory (lung) disease. It was first detected in China and has now been detected internationally. While the immediate health risk in the United States is low, it is important to plan for any possible outbreaks if the risk level increases in the future.

Concern over this new virus can make children and families anxious. While we don't know where and to what extent the disease may spread here in the United States, we do know that it is contagious, that the severity of illness can vary from individual to individual, and that there are steps we can take to prevent the spread of infection. Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise. Parents should reassure children that health and school officials are working hard to ensure that people throughout the country stay healthy. However, children also need factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

Specific Guidelines

Remain calm and reassuring.

- Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your children's anxiety.
- If true, emphasize to your children that they and your family are fine.
- Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to keep them safe and healthy.
- Let your children talk about their feelings and help reframe their concerns into the appropriate perspective.

Make yourself available.

- Children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions.
- It is important that they know they have someone who will listen to them; make time for them.
- Tell them you love them and give them plenty of affection.

Avoid excessive blaming.

- When tensions are high, sometimes we try to blame someone.
- It is important to avoid stereotyping any one group of people as responsible for the virus.
- Bullying or negative comments made toward others should be stopped and reported to the school.
- Be aware of any comments that other adults are having around your family. You may have to explain what comments mean if they are different than the values that you have at home.

Monitor television viewing and social media.

- Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet and through social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your children are present.
- Speak to your child about how many stories about COVID-19 on the Internet may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.
- Talk to your child about factual information of this disease—this can help reduce anxiety.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety—avoid this.
- Be aware that developmentally inappropriate information (i.e., information designed for adults) can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.
- Engage your child in games or other interesting activities instead.

Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible.

- Keep to a regular schedule, as this can be reassuring and promotes physical health.
- Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Be honest and accurate.

- In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment very few people in this country are sick with COVID-19.
- Children can be told this disease is thought to be spread between people who are in close contact with one another—when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- It is also thought it can be spread when you touch an infected surface or object, which is why it is so important to protect yourself.
- For additional factual information contact your school nurse, ask your doctor, or check the <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html> website.

Know the symptoms of COVID-19.

- The CDC believes these symptoms appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the disease or as long as 14 days after exposure:
 - Fever
 - Cough
 - Shortness for breath
- For some people the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life threatening. In either case it is important to check with your child's healthcare provider (or yours) and follow instructions about staying home or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection.

- Encourage your child to practice every day good hygiene—simple steps to prevent spread of illness:
 - Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds).
 - Cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow. Do not share food or drinks.

- Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
- Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over disease spread and will help to reduce their anxiety.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off illness.

Discuss new rules or practices at school.

- Many schools already enforce illness prevention habits, including frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand cleansers.
- Your school nurse or principal will send information home about any new rules or practices.
- Be sure to discuss this with your child.
- Contact your school nurse with any specific questions.

Communicate with your school.

- Let your school know if your child is sick and keep them home. Your school may ask if your child has a fever or not. This information will help the school to know why your child was kept home. If your child is diagnosed with COVID-19, let the school know so they can communicate with and get guidance from local health authorities.
- Talk to your school nurse, school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker if your child is having difficulties as a result of anxiety or stress related to COVID-19. They can give guidance and support to your child at school.
- *Make sure to follow all instructions from your school.*

Take Time to Talk

You know your children best. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them the information that health experts identify as critical to ensuring your children's health. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

When sharing information, it is important make sure to provide facts without promoting a high level of stress, remind children that adults are working to address this concern, and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

Information is rapidly changing about this new virus—to have the most correct information stay informed by accessing <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

- Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”
- Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and

community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.

- Upper middle school and high school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.
- Not everyone will get the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. School and health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- It is important that all students treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- There are things you can do to stay health and avoid spreading the disease:
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - Stay home when you are sick.
 - Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds).
 - If you don't have soap, use hand sanitizer (60–95% alcohol based).
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Additional Resources

Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/SMA14-4886>

Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Coping-with-Stress-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/sma14-4885>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>

Handwashing and Hand Sanitizer Use at Home, at Play, and Out and About, <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf>

For more information related to schools and physical and mental health, visit www.nasponline.org and www.nasn.org.