

Email from State Superintendent Sydnee Dickson to all Utah superintendents – March 14, 2020

School and District Leaders,

Thanks so much for jumping on a quick call last week before our press conference. Our response time is barely ahead of the virus and I appreciate the great leadership being displayed in this state in response. I don't know about you, but I wasn't trained in "pandemic response" as part of my educator preparation program. We are all learning together and I appreciate your support and patience.

We know this is challenging for your teachers. I have been impressed at the postings I am seeing on social media of teachers working together already, including this morning, to plan for communications with parents and students. I am proud of UT for having a strong digital teaching and learning presence and know that those of you who were early implementers are likely feeling a bit more prepared. It is not the expectation that everything will be digital and we know teachers will do their very best using whatever methods to provide learning experiences for our students.

The timing of the press conference was a challenge and yet teachers and leaders are rising to the occasion. Thank you.

Some things to consider as you move into the coming weeks:

1. Teachers and adults in the building are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than the students who are more likely to be carriers. Therefore, please ensure that educators who are more susceptible due to compromised immune systems, pregnant, or elderly, are given considerations to telework. You might consider a rotation of adults in the building vs all being there at once. Be mindful of child-care needs and allow teachers to bring their own children should they have those needs. If teachers need to not work due to illness, use the model that businesses are using to not dock pay for sick leave, etc. Be flexible and work with your associations. Determine what policies might need to be temporarily waived to accommodate this unusual circumstance. Teachers are already hearing reports of inconsistent practices which adds to frustration and anxiety. Be clear in your communication of what is expected.
2. Classified employees are also vulnerable at this time. We would expect that you continue to pay your employees and find ways they might be able to help. For example, could bus drivers deliver sack lunches to kiddos on their bus route in rural/remote places as well as those neighborhoods where their only means of transport to school is by bus. Since you are receiving funding, you should still be able to pay your employees.
3. Our Board of Education meets this week and will be discussing waivers, policies, etc., that may need to be amended. We will send out communication in real time as the decisions are made. We have a wonderful compassionate board who will make decisions in your best interest.
4. Communication with parents is key. Individual teachers reaching out to students and their parents reassures them that there is broad concern for their students. This is challenging for the many families in some of our areas who don't speak English and I know that you are already compiling information in other languages.

5. Monday morning will present new challenges and many questions. It may be confusing for students and families who aren't tuned in to media. (I have also heard and read some conflicting reports from the media). You may need to run bus routes just to ensure students aren't standing at bus stops, etc. I know you have all thought of this and anticipated things I haven't.

My staff is tele-commuting for the most part but the admin team will be at the office and all staff will be available by phone or email. Tune into our webpage at <https://schools.utah.gov/coronavirus>. It contains the latest updates as well as ideas for digital and home learning. We hope you will push out pictures and ideas on social media. The positive stories help alleviate anxiety and are counter narrative to the hiccups we will encounter. Remember that we will be re-evaluating the situation as we go. We are already seeing community spread start to occur so we could be out longer.

We are in this together and will figure it out. We've got this!!!!

With sincere appreciation,

Syd