

March 6, 2020

From Dr. Eric Mackey, State Superintendent

To: Local Superintendents

Superintendents,

Although Alabama has no confirmed cases at this time, I have decided to send further guidance and information regarding the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in order to help local school systems plan for possible confirmed cases that might be forthcoming. As you know, most of our neighboring states do have confirmed cases, and it appears to be only a matter of time until we do as well. I know we all agree that the health and safety of students and staff is of utmost importance. We are following the advice of the old adage, “prepare for the worst and hope for the best.” This particular strain of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) may be new, but the best practices for protective measures are not. Schools have been dealing with other infectious diseases like the flu, and they are already encouraging safe practices like hand washing, covering sneezes and coughs, and staying home when running fever or exhibiting other relevant symptoms.

GOVERNOR KAY IVEY’S NEWLY ESTABLISHED TASK FORCE

This morning I participated in the first meeting of the Governor’s newly formed task force to deal with this issue. Dr. Scott Harris, State Health Officer, Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH), is chairing the task force, and Dr. Harris and I are talking daily. Governor Ivey, in turn, is part of Vice President Pence’s federal response, therefore, we are totally aligned with state and federal efforts. The task force is currently focused on testing, prevention, and protective measures. Another meeting of the task force is scheduled for Monday afternoon. We are staying engaged with ADPH and the task force and remain prepared to send updates as they become available.

ALSDE COORDINATION

State School Nurse Jennifer Ventress (jventress@alsde.edu or 334-694-4717) is the chief point of contact for the ALSDE. If you have specific questions, please feel free to reach out to her directly. You are welcome to reach out to Dr. Jeff Langham or myself as well.

If you become aware of a confirmed case in your schools — whether adult or child — please contact Jennifer Ventress immediately. Of course, the health departments will be collecting this information, but it is important that we open lines of communication if a positive test is confirmed in a school community. According to healthcare experts, we understand that COVID-19 appears to be mild, absent other health issues, in the large majority of children who have been infected. However, they may be carriers of the virus and could infect others.

FIELD TRIPS AND LARGE GATHERING

First, at this point, strong consideration should be given for any travel outside the United States. As we noted last week, we are monitoring federal travel advisories. Even though only a few countries have been elevated to “Level III,” American citizens in other countries are being subjected to quarantine. While this remains a local decision, be mindful of the possible consequences if students were to become quarantined or detained in other countries. At the very least, ask yourself the question, “If our students travel out of the country and become quarantined, what will be our response?”

Some of your students are planning to embark on trips that are not school sanctioned but may be associated with the school or led by school employees. In that regard, please work closely with any third-party tour groups traveling abroad to avoid any miscommunication.

Secondly, as for trips within the continental United States, the threat of quarantine remains lower at this time, but may not be out of the picture. Be sure to check the most up-to-date information regarding your destination before students travel out of state as part of an organized trip. Reinforce best practices for prevention.

At this time, we encourage you to handle school gatherings like ballgames, plays, etc. as you normally would. If necessary, add precautions like those best practices for prevention (hand washing stations, etc.). We will continue to work closely with the AHSAA as well as the ADPH to monitor the situation and will provide any further guidance as it may become relevant.

POSSIBLE DISRUPTIONS TO THE SCHOOL SCHEDULE

In the event that it should become advisable to close any schools for any length of time from a few days up to a couple of weeks, we will use the same protocol as is currently in place for the flu. If the Governor declares a state of emergency, days for both students and employees can be reduced without make up. **Please contact us before finalizing any decisions about closing schools or cancelling sporting events.**

PREVENTION

The ADPH has developed a school resources page. Please refer to additional information at this site: <http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/infectiousdiseases/cov-schools.html>

IN CLOSING

Dr. Harris and I are planning to meet with media next Tuesday afternoon. We are constantly monitoring the situation and updating our plans based on best practices and expert medical advice.

Thank you for your continued leadership and diligence,

Eric G. Mackey

State Superintendent of Education