



UEN Concerns and Requests Regarding COVID-19 Continued School Closures March 31, 2020

The Honorable Kim Reynolds,
Governor, State of Iowa
Dr. Ann Lebo, Director, Department of Education
CC: Linda Fandel

Schools are the gathering place of the community, with thousands of students, parents, staff, vendors, and volunteers entering our buildings every day. As leaders of the state's largest school systems, we are convinced that reopening our schools too soon is ill-advised and not in the best interest of our students and their families, our staffs, and our communities. Our parents and staff remain justifiably concerned and anxious about the community spread of COVID-19 accelerating across our communities. If schools reopen too quickly, there will be staff and students with very light or no symptoms who will infect others, re-igniting the virus spread across our communities and diminishing the impact of statewide social distancing measures.

We thank the Governor, Legislature and State DE for support to date: for direction to close schools through April 12, for waiving the minimum requirements of instructional time associated with that closure, for continued advocacy with the US Department of Education and waiver of ESSA requirements including state testing, and for waiver of free and reduced price meal processes so we can continue to feed children in our communities under very different conditions. We are also grateful to Iowa Workforce Development for their support of our staffs' and students' families, so many of whom are impacted by furloughs and layoffs in their communities. The Departments of Public Health and Human Services also deserve commendation as they continue to be stressed daily in their work for Iowans.

UEN districts employ an estimated 32,000 employees, providing necessary health insurance during this pandemic and a monthly total payroll of \$159 million, being paid during the shutdown to support our employees, their families, and our Iowa economy. We provide a necessary "supply-chain" of day care, school breakfasts and lunches, educational services and workforce development. UEN is big business, yet is not at the table with our DE or Governor's staffs in collective decision-making. We offer to work with you as partners, just like other large employers are engaged. The UEN serves over 176,000 students and their families. Over 55% of those students come from low-income families. The UEN educates 66% of all English-language learners in Iowa. Many of these families are without computer devices or internet at home, and many are without engaged adult support for additional learning as their parents are working on the frontlines in our communities' essential services. We are very concerned for the health and safety of all Iowans and for an equitable recovery of instruction for our students once this pandemic recedes. These are our immediate concerns:

- **Continued Closure Clarity**
 - **We call on the Governor to announce this week a decision to close schools through May 1 and provide at least two weeks' notice for any closure extension.**
 - **We call on the Governor to commit in advance to waive the requirement to make up instructional days for additional closures set by school districts, if it is determined by local leaders, based on the status of school capacity to reopen while keeping staff and students safe, that closure be a date beyond that set by the Governor.**

Absent knowledge of the Governor's plan for these individual cases, UEN district leaders are in a budget bind; we simply cannot continue to pay staff during a closure and again during make-up days down the road.

- **Continuous Learning Issue Clarity**

- UEN remains deeply concerned about the equity of connectivity challenges. We seek clarity on exactly what we may and may not do in providing continuing supports to students.
- The Continuous Learning Guidance, March 27, is still somewhat vague with additional rubrics pending. With almost 12,000 certified staff combined, the professional development support for virtual learning is a huge endeavor and not something we can implement and turn on a dime once those rubrics are available. What is the minimum expectation and what is and is not allowed?

- **Concurrent Enrollment:** support for concurrent enrollment. We are running into hurdles with community colleges. Our community college partners are not demonstrating the necessary flexibility to ensure that concurrently enrolled high school students have an equitable opportunity to complete their courses.
- **AEA Roles and Clarity on Special Education:** March 27 guidance states that AEA services, including special education services, "resume when schools provide continuous learning through required educational services." Does that mean no AEA support is available in preparing for those required educational services or in the case when educational services remain voluntary? We have experienced inconsistency, even confusion, in resolving special education questions with AEAs.
- **Equity when COVID-19 Recedes:** the diversity of UEN students, size of UEN systems, and connectivity challenges compared to many other Iowa districts leave us to realistically fear the learning gap will increase for students from low-income families, non-English speaking students and students with disabilities. Iowa leaders must begin to plan now to support our neediest students. Federal assistance should be directed to those districts most impacted by closures based on relative poverty/need. Additional supports might include funding for targeted summer school programs, additional make-up days in June, or funding for an early start to the 2020-21 school year. Please work with UEN leaders on this rebuilding strategy and engage in a conversation on the long-term impacts of poverty on learning and successful strategies to close the opportunity gap for all students.

Our essential purpose is to educate students. UEN schools will continue to do everything in our power to address instructional and economic impacts in our communities. Thank you for your leadership commitment to keep our students, staff and their families safe.

School Districts in Support of this Statement:

Ames - Cedar Falls - Cedar Rapids - College Community - Council Bluffs - Davenport
Des Moines - Dubuque - Ft. Dodge - Iowa City - Linn-Mar - Mason City - Marshalltown
Muscatine - Ottumwa - Sioux City - Southeast Polk - Waterloo

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