

Pine-Richland School District to Extend Closure through May 1, 2020

March 20, 2020

Dear Pine-Richland Students, Staff, Families and Community,

Although not directed specifically to schools, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidance on March 15th that **people should not gather in groups larger than 50 for the next eight weeks**. We have watched the progression of this disease across the world and country. The expansion of COVID-19 testing kits and testing protocols in the United States has resulted in an exponential increase in confirmed or presumptive cases. Through the relevant health departments, those test results lead to the care of that individual and isolation/quarantine of close contacts (e.g., immediate family). Allegheny County saw its first cases of COVID-19 last weekend with a total that now stands at 18 confirmed cases. The capacity of the healthcare system is a significant concern as the number of infected people grows.

At this time, the Pine-Richland School District is extending the closure of our six schools through at least Friday, May 1, 2020. We understand that life in this community, region and country has shifted in profound ways. It is highly likely that the period of closure will extend even further and possibly through the end of the 2019 - 2020 school year. At a special meeting of the Pine-Richland School Board a few minutes ago, the **board unanimously supported** this recommendation to extend the closure of our schools and continue the continuity of learning model already in place. **Although our buildings are closed, our mission to focus on learning for every student every day continues.** We prepared for COVID-19 in the past few weeks. We shifted from traditional education to our alternative model using print and digital resources without the need to even hit the "pause" button. On Tuesday, we deployed almost 900 Chromebook computers to families with additional needs. Teachers and paraprofessionals designed "Bridge" lessons to reinforce critical skills and now students are beginning new learning. **Families are settling into a structure and routine at home.** This discipline will be critical to ensure continuity in learning.

Why May 1st? Although no one has a crystal ball for COVID-19, we have had the opportunity to observe the progression of this global pandemic. It is not in the best interest of students, families or learning to operate in "two week" extensions of a closure. This leads to uncertainty in educational continuity and structure for students. The community spread of COVID-19 will continue to accelerate in our area and [mitigation strategies](#) will be implemented to correspond with that increase. **In complex times, we want to provide clear direction.** As the likelihood of substantial community transmission increases, extended school closures are part of the response. Given some recent guidelines by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), our existing academic calendar will remain in effect due to our continuity of learning plan. As an example, the date for commencement of the Class of 2020 will remain the same. We also learned yesterday afternoon from PDE that testing for the PSSAs and Keystone Exams is being eliminated this year.

We are all experiencing stress. Churches and gyms are closed. Permanent and temporary job loss is a reality for many Americans. This global pandemic is reaching all communities. **Even as you read this message, one strategy to manage stress and reduce anxiety is to engage in breathing exercises.** For example, you can inhale for a four-count...hold your breath for a few seconds...then exhale for an eight-count. Repeat that sequence for a couple of minutes and feel the shoulders and body begin to relax. Mrs. Firmin, Wexford Elementary second-grade teacher, shared [this peaceful activity](#) for her students. **This period of extended closure should allow all of us - parents, students, and educators - to come to grips with the fact that the alternative model of instruction started this week will serve as the "new normal" for learning.**



As educators, we will learn and improve each week. Continuous improvement is part of our school culture. We also know that families will also settle into a new routine and structure at home. As a strong community, we can "dig in" and embrace this new reality. Routines and structure can strengthen our [coping mechanisms](#). As mentioned in our last update, we can learn from Goldilocks and find the "just right" amount and type of learning activities. It is not the quantity of school work. It is the level of quality and meaningfulness of the learning goals.

With this update, we are introducing the Spotlight on Innovation. Innovation is one of our PRIDE values at Pine-Richland. We have two main areas of focus with this program. Anyone - students, staff and parents - can [nominate a lesson or learning activity](#) that demonstrates creativity and innovation. Please include a "picture" (not video) and "brief description" of the activity.

Also, we are looking for innovation in the home! Families can share examples of how they are embracing this new reality so that other families can consider these "innovative" habits for their homes. **We would place these examples on our district website.** [Click here](#) or on the video to see how Mrs. Becky Fickes, Richland Elementary kindergarten teacher, was able to read to her students and introduce elements of literature.

The author gave permission for us to "eBlast" this to our entire community! In addition to reviewing **characters** and **setting**, she introduced new learning to understand **problems** and **solutions**.

Next, we will establish a mechanism to gather your feedback. **This general survey will begin next week and help us gather some critical information as we learn to deliver a completely new model for learning (i.e., building, clarity of directions, quantity of work, level of challenge and responsiveness to questions).** This survey is to help us gather general feedback at all levels of our program. If a student or family has specific questions or concerns, they should reach out to the individual teacher via email. We have built virtual "Office Hours" into the schedule from 8:00 - 9:00 a.m. and 12:30 - 1:00 p.m. each day.

Finally, we know that families may feel overwhelmed with communication. The Goldilocks challenge of the "just right amount" of communication is something that we are working to establish. Please use this weekend to take a breath and begin to settle into a routine. Our staff members are also parents. Staff members are also working to find a new rhythm and structure. We know that many questions exist and new questions will emerge (e.g., end-of-quarter and SAT). We will work through each question in the next few weeks.

Respectfully,

Dr. Brian Miller, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Michael Pasquinelli, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent (7-12)

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[COVID-19 Website](#)

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