

Economic and Education Recommendations to Survive Arizona's Inevitable Statewide School Closures

A long-term closure of schools in Arizona is inevitable. Several districts, schools, and charter networks have already closed. The remaining will soon be forced to do the same. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently released guidelines that school closures for the Coronavirus should last between 8 and 20 weeks. A clear plan for a long-term, statewide shutdown is critical.

Below are recommendations that we, the school systems leaders of Arizona, are asking the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR), the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), leadership at the Capitol, and leaders within business and industry to support. Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list, it does outline essential recommendations that will be necessary for Arizona – our students, our school systems, our communities, and our economy – to survive the unavoidable shutdown.

At the core of these recommendations is a bold decision at the state-level that provides flexibility for districts, schools, and charter networks to reduce the typical 180-day and alternate 200-day academic year requirement, yet continue 180-day and 200-day funding allocations. This would enable schools and school systems to provide modified, alternative, and even online education to its students and, at the same time, ensure that all non-certificated employees continue to get paid through the end of the academic year. Without this flexibility, in addition to the other recommendations, Arizona will soon see 100,000's of hourly, non-certificated education support professionals (paraprofessionals, maintenance staff, etc.) experience a gap in pay that could last months, resulting in a crushing blow to families and the economy.

In addition, the following recommendations would have the smallest impact to our state's and, subsequently, our school systems' budgets.

The recommendations are as follows:

ABOR

Create guidelines, flexibility, and perhaps even waivers for high school seniors transitioning to college (i.e. final grades, final transcripts, etc.)

ADE

Create guidelines and flexibility for schools to offer less than 180 days and 200 days of school, as applicable. Schools are currently near Day 135. Consider a 150 to 160-day requirement for 180-day calendars and 160 to 170-day requirement for 200-day calendars, for enrollment to be based off of an alternate day (such as the 100th) instead of the current policy of 200th day of attendance. In addition, consider the implications for 4-day work weeks.

Create guidelines and flexibility for seat time/minutes so that funding for 180 and 200 days continues as normal. With seat time/minutes flexibility, online learning and modified

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schedules would be possible. This should not be mandatory, however, as a large percentage of low-income families do not have access to reliable internet and computers at home.

Testing (AzMERIT, AIMS, etc.) needs to be cancelled for the year. This would also impact letter grades for the following year. Districts/schools with high school-aged students would still need to ensure that students still complete ACT, SAT, AP, and IB exams.

Flexibility for graduation requirements, where needed, must be considered.

Food services and transportation funding and flexibility needs to be granted so that food service departments can continue to offer food to students as well as consider the use of buses to transport food to community-based locations. Schools may also be able to utilize federal dollars to assist with food services.

Leadership at the Capitol

Support 180-day and 200-day funding for schools even if the 180-day/200-day requirement is waived/modified.

Ensure that paying school-based hourly employees during the shutdown period is not deemed "a gift of public funds." Keep in mind that 30-40% of all educators in Arizona are hourly employees. As an alternative, schools and school systems may require hourly employees to engage in alternative work options, which may include professional development, training, planning for student support, and being on call to work when needed.

Allocate extra funding just for hourly employees to cover the cost of an extended school year (if schools ultimately must "postpone" and offer classes during the summer). Offer a waiver to 200-day schools for extended years in this case on account of the already reduced summer break for staff and students.

Consider the allocation of funding for schools and community centers to open as childcare and resource centers for the community.

Business and Industry

Consider the impact that school closures have on families and the general workforce. Support reduced or free internet access, Sick Leave for employees, reduced service rates, childcare assistance, and other services that would support families who experience a financial crisis as a result of this shutdown.

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