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# Philly schools to distribute computers to students as coronavirus could force closure for the rest of the school year

by [Kristen A. Graham](#) and [Maddie Hanna](#), Updated: March 24, 2020



TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



## Editor's Note

News about the coronavirus is changing quickly. The latest information can be found at [inquirer.com/coronavirus](https://www.inquirer.com/coronavirus)

The Philadelphia School District is planning to distribute computers to children who lack them, and aims to put a new distance learning plan in place by the second week of April, Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. said Tuesday.

“We’re going to get the technology out to any child that says they need the technology,” Hite said at a news conference.

The news came as advocates called on the state to require districts to provide education for all students, including English-language learners and children with disabilities, during coronavirus-outbreak shutdowns.

Pennsylvania schools are now closed through April 6. Learning has been optional in Philadelphia — school system officials had made online resources available to students, as well as paper packets, but because of [state concerns that all kids have access to technology](#), no assignment could be graded or made mandatory.

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According to district data, 41% of students in grades 3 through 8 have a computer at home; 51% of students in grades 9 through 12 do.

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Updated: June 4, 2020 — 9:10 AM

### How many cases have there been?

There have been about 6.53 million confirmed cases and 386,500 deaths globally. In the United States, there have been about 1.85 million confirmed cases and 107,100 deaths.

### What are the symptoms?

Like other respiratory infections, symptoms of coronavirus can include fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. Here is an [in-depth description](#).

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School computers will be repurposed and lent to children who lack them, Hite said. The School District will also have to purchase a number of new Chromebooks, he said.

“We’re trying to get the best deal,” Hite said. “We’re doing an inventory of the machines that we have in schools that we could redeploy. ... Naturally, it’s going to take some time to work through the logistics of this plan.”

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The cost to the district is still unclear, Hite said, but would be tabulated in time to present a figure to the Board of Education at its next meeting, scheduled for Thursday.

The superintendent said the district is also working with Comcast and others to provide internet access and mobile hot spots. Comcast has already offered low-income families two free months of internet access.

Remote learning will look different for different students, with individual schools calling the shots on how the technology will be used, Hite said. Once all children have technology, he said, the district will address “expectations for teachers.”

He said the district is also exploring using broadcast TV, including local partners and the district’s public-access cable channel, to provide educational programming.

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Pennsylvania officials on Monday extended the school shutdown through April 6. Kansas and Virginia have already canceled in-person instruction for the rest of the school year.

“I could envision something like that happening here in Pennsylvania if this goes much longer,” said Hite.

The third marking period was supposed to close at the end of March; Hite said that because of the coronavirus closures, the marking period will remain open and could be used to determine final grades.

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While Pennsylvania could allow schools to reopen after April 6, the week of April 6 through 10 was already planned as the district's spring break, so Philadelphia schools cannot reopen before April 13, Hite said.

"This is an extraordinary time that we are trying to navigate through," he said.

Hite dismissed the possibility of extending the instructional year through the summer for most students, saying the district needs time to ready buildings for fall.

He said the district could institute an extended learning year plan inside schools, if public health conditions allow, for some students, including English-language learners and students with special-education plans whose needs can't be met during the shutdown.

New instructions from the state now give Philadelphia and other districts the ability to offer formal education to most students, Hite said.

The updated Pennsylvania Department of Education guidance said "we no longer had to wait until we could provide services to everyone before we provided any service whatsoever," Hite said.

While the department on Tuesday said it "strongly encourages" districts to provide education during the shutdown, advocates pushed the state to make that recommendation a requirement.

"We need more rigorous guidance to ensure all schools provide the level of educational services that support students," Maura McInerney, legal director of the Education Law Center, said Tuesday. The nonprofit sent a letter to Gov. Tom Wolf and Education Secretary Pedro Rivera on Monday, voicing concern that children with the greatest needs "will be irrevocably harmed" if they do not receive services while schools are closed due to the coronavirus.

» **READ MORE: *Pa. schools close till April 6; long-term closures expected elsewhere amid coronavirus outbreak***

The letter cites "deep disparities in educational resources between well-funded and underfunded school districts," and asks the state to order districts to minimize unequal access to technology.

Previously, the state Education Department told districts that if they provide education during the shutdown, all students must have equal access, including those with disabilities. As a result, some districts say they have been awaiting clarity on how to provide online learning without violating those students' rights.

U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos over the weekend said federal law protecting students with disabilities should not keep schools from providing distance learning.

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by [Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry](#)

The Education Law Center's letter said states are not allowed to "unilaterally deny educational services" for more than 10 days to students with disabilities.

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