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Coronavirus: How will school closures affect learning, families in Ohio and Kentucky?

[Max Londberg and Julia Fair](#), Cincinnati Enquirer Published 4:28 p.m. ET March 12, 2020 | Updated 6:43 a.m. ET March 13, 2020

The threat from the new coronavirus will soon become real for tens of thousands of local students and their families. School will be out, at least temporarily.

Boone County Schools will shift to remote learning on Monday in an attempt to tamp down the pandemic. The district, with more than 20,000 students, was the first in the Cincinnati region to announce it would suspend in-person classes.

The district will be followed by all Ohio schools, affecting more than 1.7 million public school students and thousands more private students, after Gov. Mike DeWine implemented a three-week spring break beginning Tuesday.

"This is not an action I took lightly, but it is the right thing to do," DeWine said

And Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear on Thursday afternoon called for all Kentucky public schools to close for two weeks starting Monday, affecting around 650,000 students.

Ohio and Kentucky aren't the only states to take this step. At least one other, Maryland, announced Thursday it would close all its schools across the state.

School leaders on both sides of the Ohio River have been working feverishly to plan for this possibility.

Each school in the region will likely have a different strategy. But everyone agreed the contingency education plans are unprecedented. They could include learning tools such as paperwork packets sent home with students or digital devices and software to connect students with lessons, practice assignments and assessments.

Kelly Middleton, the superintendent of Newport Independent in Northern Kentucky, said, "We're all a little nervous. It's a pandemic. ... We may be close to worst case."

This is a transmission electron microscopic image of an isolate from the first U.S. case of COVID-19. The spherical extracellular viral particles contain cross-sections through the viral genome, seen as black dots. (Photo: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Beechwood Independent Schools Superintendent Mike Stacy expressed there were "no elders" for him to seek guidance from.

As of Thursday afternoon, there was not a confirmed case of coronavirus in Northern Kentucky or Southwest Ohio, but school officials from across the region are at work on a plan to educate in this era of coronavirus.

Mason and Northwest school districts announced they would close before the rest of the state, beginning Friday and Monday, respectively.

The governors of Kentucky and Ohio had earlier recommended schools prepare to shutter their doors.

Health experts and scholarly research speak to the effectiveness of school closures, coupled with limiting large public gatherings, in [slowing the spread](#) of a virus in an outbreak. Doing so decreases the stress on medical systems.

But the looming school closures and shift to remote learning will fundamentally alter K-12 education for the foreseeable future.

School officials are working to ease the significant barriers that distance learning will create to student learning and access to school meals, according to interviews with local superintendents and other school officials.

A bright spot? School districts won't be under as much pressure to secure cleaning supplies, which was becoming a burden. Cincinnati Public Schools recently saw a delay in a shipment of products because "vendors have been mandated by their suppliers that hospitals and nursing homes take priority over other customers," according to an email from the superintendent.

Feeding kids

Every student in Newport, Kentucky is eligible to receive free meals every day.

That will be even a higher priority than education in a closure, said superintendent Middleton, citing [Abraham Maslow's famed hierarchy of needs](#). The hierarchy places things like access to food and shelter as most important in a list of psychological priorities of human needs.

To ensure Newport students have food, the district devised a plan to offer to-go bags for breakfast and lunch that will be available for pickup at school buildings.

"The (Board of Education) will pay for it, even if it wasn't paid for by the federal program," Middleton said, adding supplying food is "a must."

About 1,400 Newport Independent Schools students are signed up to receive free meals.

A bill introduced in the The U.S. House of Representatives introduced a [bill](#) introduced in the U.S. n Wednesday that includes expanding food stamp eligibility for families experiencing school closures, according to an email to local school officials from Michael Casserly, the

executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban public school systems

"The areas of the bill most relevant to school districts are the food program provisions and the new federal sick leave provisions," Casserly wrote.

Ryan Messer, a Cincinnati Public Schools board member, said the district's superintendent ensured board members that plans are in place to feed children if schools must close.

Messer added that the district is also tracking absences among staff and students to detect any signals of a possible coronavirus outbreak. The new virus causes a disease called COVID-19. T

About 20,000 Boone County students are signed up to receive free lunches. Their school cafeterias will still be open to those students for breakfast and lunch, said Boone County Board Vice-Chairperson Matt McIntire.

Several principals in the district have offered to deliver meals to families.

Learning remotely with and without internet

Not everyone in the region has internet access, but everyone needs a way to learn.

CPS Superintendent Laura Mitchell delivered a presentation Wednesday to the Board of Education. She relayed how the district plans to handle remote learning.

Schools will make paper copies of learning packets to send home with students, according to Mitchell's presentation. Students will also receive tips for accessing Schoology, an online learning program.

Intervention specialists and teachers working with non-native English speakers will be asked to collaborate with general teachers to ensure their students' learning needs are met, according to the presentation. Specific resources for non-native English students will be available through Schoology.

"The packets will contain work for students in the core content areas ... with ways for students to test themselves and offering help sections by grade level," Mitchell wrote this week in a letter to staff members.

Renee Nelson, a CPS parent and a second grade teacher at Pleasant Hill Academy in College Hill, said by text that "unfortunately our students don't all have access to internet at home or devices, so we are only sending a work packet home."

Nelson believes students can learn better online than from a packet. She's been instructed to prepare work that will last a week for students.

CPS students won't be the only ones impacted by a lack of home internet access.

An estimated 10% of students at Middletown City Schools in Butler County don't have internet access, the highest percentage in Greater Cincinnati, according to Census estimates.

In Northern Kentucky, Dayton Independent and Newport Independent have among the highest percentages in the region, with 13% of students without home internet. It's 18% in Silver Grove.

The households of nearly one in five Newport students don't have a computer at home.

Middleton, the Newport superintendent, said he sympathizes with students, particularly seniors who may miss prom, chunks of sporting seasons and other activities.

"You hate it for your kids looking forward to their senior year, some things they're not going to be able to do," he said.

Mindy Nagel, whose two daughters attend CPS schools, said a possible closure won't significantly affect her family, as she and her husband can work from home and the family has WiFi and laptops.

But she worries remote learning could disproportionately affect students without such access and widen inequity in education.

"And what about students whose parents can't take off work to be home with them?" Nagel said.