



Catholic Diocese
of Cleveland

Cathedral Square

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

To: Leaders of Catholic Schools and Parish Schools of Religion

From: Gregory A. Coogan, Secretary for Catechetical Formation
Frank W. O’Linn, Ed.D. Secretary of Education and Superintendent of Schools
Fr. Donald P. Oleksiak, Diocesan Administrator

Re: Update for Catholic Schools and PSR regarding COVID-19

Date: March 12, 2020

On March 9, 2020, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine signed an executive order declaring a state of emergency to protect the citizens of Ohio from the dangerous effects of COVID-19, a respiratory disease that had not been previously identified in humans and can easily spread from person to person. On March 12, Governor DeWine announced plans to close all Ohio K-12 schools (public and private), for three weeks, beginning after school March 16. The state also issued rules to prohibit mass gatherings, defined as gatherings of 100 people or more in any confined indoor or outdoor space, with exceptions for typical schools, workplaces, and religious gatherings.

The above strategies to contain the current pandemic reflect the call to community and fundamental right to life that are central themes of Catholic Social Teaching. We as Catholic ministers must answer the call for the good of the lives of our neighbors in Ohio and throughout the world. Catholic schools and Religious Education Programs (PSR) should prepare for the following immediately:

School closures: After school on Monday, March 16, schools and PSR should cease gathering in person for the next three weeks. This should include all school-sponsored events, activities, clubs, CYO athletic practices and games, and the like through at least April 3.

Day schools should prepare to sustain meaningful learning through distance via paper (e.g. the “blizzard bags” permitted under Ohio attendance rules) or online or correspondence means or some combination. Schools should apply maximum creativity for the benefit of students and their families. They do not need to have the 3 weeks figured out right away - a most important step is for schools to establish communication channels with parents by which information can be continually shared.

Large gatherings: Schools should also immediately cancel, alter the format of, or reschedule (postpone) other events that qualify as mass gatherings, more than 100 people, and notify



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communities as soon as possible. Schools are encouraged to be creative in offering alternative possibilities for some mass gatherings that can include social distancing, such as using webcasts or teleconferencing tools for a school information night. This large gathering directive applies even beyond the shut down slated through at least April 3.

Please refer to the following questions and answers for further detail.

How should schools plan for instruction?

The priorities for schools and PSR programs are first safety and wellbeing followed closely by learning and formation. Schools that in the name of safety and wellbeing are forced to change how they deliver instruction by going online or utilizing paper resources will need to be creative in how to continue instruction and formation. They may need to reconsider how best to deliver instruction in content and skills, the best methods for providing student feedback, and how best to assess concepts and calculate student grades. School leaders are encouraged to explore innovative solutions for this temporary situation, giving consideration to those who lack reliable internet access. The Office of Catholic Education has gathered more resources here regarding the shift to online or remote learning.

Which school or parish large gatherings should be cancelled?

Many Catholic schools have already cancelled or postponed upcoming travel and large group activities. On March 12 the state of Ohio issued rules to prohibit mass gatherings, defined as gatherings of 100 people or more in any confined indoor or outdoor space. This does not include a ban on typical schools (beyond the 3-week period) or workplaces, nor does it include religious gatherings (including weddings and funerals), as well as gatherings protected under first amendment speech rights. While athletic or other events that exclude spectators (though permitting immediate family and media) are not prohibited, we do not encourage school sports continuing over the time that school is on this state-mandated break.

What the government has set is the minimum threshold, and we are expected to use our common sense to protect the greater good by means of social distancing. Any activities that schools or parishes decide to continue in this time of emergency should be continued only with the greatest care and sensitivity.

What about those who rely on the federal free or reduced priced meals program for significant nutrition?

According to the Ohio Department of Education, the state has asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture to continue offering free and reduced-price meals to low-income students in the event of school closure, which could be available for pick up. Nutrition services of the Diocese



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of Cleveland has yet to receive further specifics, but is seeking information. We will keep schools informed as we learn more.

Do staff need to report to schools during the closure?

How to continue learning during this state-mandated closure is a challenge that each school will need to meet individually. The directives from the state would permit all employees to come to school and use school resources. Most schools will be required to balance the needs of educators who themselves are parents and who therefore have additional childcare responsibilities during this state-wide closure. We encourage broad creativity and flexibility where applicable.

If the school's spring (Easter) break is not over the mandated closure period, will students need to attend school during the regularly scheduled break to ensure enough instructional hours?

It is unclear what modifications will be made to the state's hour requirements or how long-distance learning will be counted, however the governor indicated an intent for broad flexibility in the face of this unusual circumstance. Therefore it is unlikely that it would be required for these additional hours to be required to be made up at that time, though not impermissible if a school and its community desired to do so.

What if school is closed during our state testing window?

While specific guidance has not been drafted yet, Governor DeWine made reference to potentially waiving required state testing as part of the emergency, again referring to necessary flexibility. Regardless, the recent addition of MAP as an approved K-3 assessment for nonpublic schools can only be helpful to this situation.

Why make changes to schools and PSR if the virus is primarily affecting older people?

Though the virus to date has shown lower severity of illness for people under 20 years of age, the strategy to cancel events or change delivery of school or PSR programming is to limit the spread of the virus across the population. Therefore all schools are required to close even if they are not connected directly to active COVID-19 cases.

How long will this go on?

The required closure is currently slated through Friday, April 3, though Governor DeWine stated that he would be advised by medical experts as to the progress of the disease and the containment strategy. The executive order and state of emergency remain in full force and effect until the emergency no longer exists.



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The Office of Catechetical Formation and the Office of Catholic Education stand ready to serve as you make decisions for your programs and families. Let us take to heart the words of our Savior and “be not afraid” in this time of difficulty, but work together for the good of all to prevent the spread of illness and protect the most vulnerable among us.