

Frequently Asked Questions about School Closure and eLearning:

1. Will students need to make up work next school year or will everyone move up a grade level, even if there was relevant info they will need for the future that hasn't been learned?

This question is really about retention, the 'holding back' of students in their current grade level. Retention decisions are made on a case by case basis and made based upon the likelihood of greater long-term student success with promotion or with retention. That will remain the case here. Students, and parents with them, are encouraged to complete all of their work currently being assigned to them through eLearning. The mastery of this work is important to their later success in school and life.

2. How will all of this affect the budget mostly heavily for next year?

While some of the fiscal impacts are probably still unknown, the school budget will probably unfold pretty much as it would have without school closure since employees are still being paid at their regular rates and about 85% of our spending is on employee costs. The food service budget will be affected significantly due to the increase in meals being served but this budget is, by law, separate from the school district general fund and so will have little or no impact on it.

The larger impact will likely be on next year, the 2020-21 school year. While current law calls for a 2% increase, given the epidemic's likely devastating effect on state sales tax revenues, it is possible a special session of the legislature will revise that to a 0%. For that reason, we will be bringing in a 2020-21 budget with a forecast of a 0% increase, then adjust it upward in the event the State remains at 2%. There are other possibilities, as well, from the state level but we will need to wait to hear about a special session if, indeed, one is held.

3. How will college prep be affected - mostly for Seniors this year - that can't take ACT's or finish required classes needed for scholarship, etc.?

To our knowledge all required courses, including dual credit coursework, remains in place and so this should not be an issue for college prep. The ACT is currently working on ways to have additional test offerings once quarantines have been lifted. Universities are also aware of the situation and are making adjustments for students unable to take the exam. Consult the ACT website for additional plans for offering the test in alternative settings.

4. How will summer programs that take care of kids - like Kids' Klub--be affected?

Kids' Klub will be unable to utilize school facilities while school closures remain in place but intend to resume operations once such closures are lifted. The one exception to this is the offering of daycare to health care workers and security workers if and when daycare becomes necessary due to an increase in health care demands in our community. In that

case, the school district intends to permit Kids Klub to utilize the Early Childhood Center building, located at the west end of the MCTEA parking lot, for that purpose. In fact, a consortium of community groups, including United Way, the Mitchell Area Charitable Fund, EMBE, Avera-Queen of Peace, and the Mitchell School District met to discuss and plan for this possibility. As a result, daycare for families of essential workers will be begin on Monday, April 27. Consult the EMBE website for details.

5. How will the various clubs be affected since many missed necessary fundraisers that are hugely important to their success - like Friend De Coup.

Each such club is discussing ways to make up for lost revenues due to cancelled fundraisers. In some cases, a portion of the loss has been made up for by cancelled performances/events which also reduced expenditures. No doubt, once closures and quarantines have been lifted, new fundraisers will be determined and offered to make up for such losses. However, there will be some definite hardships for these groups.

6. Are we prepared to start and run the next school year with students at home?

While a number of decisions and prep work would no doubt be necessary to operate school with eLearning for the start of the 2020-21 school year, structurally we are prepared. The fundamental elements—technology, bandwidth, employment, etc.—are in place. Should this occur, we would need to work on a number of ongoing issues but these are doable compared to the more fundamental needs. The district administration has begun discussing this issue but remains focused on the current needs of eLearning at the current time.

7. Are we holding students to a high enough educational standard while they are working from home?

We certainly hope so though, of course, there are no doubt examples of students being held to too high a standard as well as students being held to too low a standard. Principals are reaching out to teachers to assist them with providing high-quality instruction within the limitations of the eLearning environment. There is no question that holding students to rigorous standards is more difficult in an eLearning environment, at least currently, especially with students who lack sufficient support outside the school setting.

8. What about those who don't have parents at home to help them?

Obviously, this makes providing their education with high standards much more challenging. We frankly depend upon involved parents at all times but especially in the eLearning environment. Teachers and principals are actively searching for new, better techniques to assist such students.

9. Are we holding teachers to a high enough standard during this time?

Principals are actively reaching out to teachers to assist them with the eLearning process. In doing so, this is one of the issues being considered and addressed. This process is no different than occurs while schools are in regular session.

10. What is being done with kids who have no internet access?

We have been addressing this issue in at least two ways. First, we are offering to assist families without internet access to secure such access through offerings made by internet providers. Second, we are offering packets of work—when such can be safely provided to such students—so that they are continue their learning through paper and pencil packets. Other solutions are also being sought through teachers and principals reaching out to other educators for innovative ideas.

11. Where is the access to school guidance counselors?

At the elementary level, some guidance counselors sent home lessons on the last day we were physically in school. They are also using Google classroom to offer lessons and joining Zoom classroom meetings when invited by the regular classroom teachers. In some cases, counselors sent home letters to parents with advice from the America Counseling Association on how to help their child during the coronavirus outbreak. Counselors are also ‘checking in’ with students they had been meeting with individually or who have been identified since as benefitting from one-to-one virtual contact. Counseling resources have been offered on building websites.

At the secondary level, counselors are reaching out to individual students, checking in to see if they are continuing community services provided to them when school was in session. They are also sending out mass e-mails as wellness checks and just ongoing contacts. They are also calling and e-mailing/texting individual students on any number of issues—postsecondary prep, wellness, scholarships. They are also checking in with teachers to get a sense of how they are working through this rather unique process and time. Particularly at the high school, they are monitoring student progress toward graduation, especially for seniors, and winding things up for international students.

12. How flexible are teachers being with students? What about those who have limited access to technology (e.g., one phone in the house but multiple students needed to access Zoom at overlapping times).

The technology access question has really been answered above (question 10). As to flexibility, it is difficult to adequately typify this over our faculty of 200 teachers. If a student or parent is struggling with getting everything in, they should reach out to their teacher and, if the situation in their mind remains unresolved, their building principal.

13. Are principals communicating with parents?

Yes, through regular channels—newsletters, etc.—they are communicating with parents. They are also communicating through additional channels as well, including e-mails, ‘push’ notifications, etc.

14. Are teachers communicating with parents?

While teachers are, as in the regular setting, communicating to a far greater extent with students than with parents, teachers are reaching out to parents both with general information and with information specific to their child, especially when the child is engaging less fully than the teacher would like. As to the extent of such communication with parents, this will of course vary somewhat from teacher to teacher.

15. Is the school board talking with our state and national representatives and local media and trying to convey a plan of action with contingencies?

Through the school district central office, lines of communication with the Governor’s office and the South Dakota Department of Education have remained open. A rather full exchange of information has been the norm. As for federal officials, that has largely been a matter of information transmission from that level to the local level. Nevertheless, our federal representatives in Congress have made offers to assist us in our needs where appropriate. The superintendent of schools has been in frequent—several times weekly--contact with KORN, KMIT, and the *Daily Republic*, as to the evolution of the current situation and school district responses and adjustments to it. One example of the latter has been the offering of free meals in all 5 school buildings on the first day of school closure and then the subsequent offerings of such meals in 5 additional locations in town on school buses, and the delivery of meals into the rural areas as of April 7.

16. Are we considering a plan to health check student/employee every day as they come to a building?

We do not currently have any health check process in place. However, we have been in discussion with other entities about how to implement such a program, as well as when to do so. In the event that health checks are implemented, they will be based upon practices recommended by health care officials. A health check process will be used for the EMBE-provided daycare at the Early Childhood Center.

17. What are plans for graduation?

Dr. Childs, MHS principal, has met, virtually, with a number of student government representatives to review ideas for commencement. As a result of that meeting, two proposals were drafted and sent to members of the Class of 2020. A strong majority of the class, over 70%, voted for a virtual commencement. The School Board will consider that proposal at their April 27 school board meeting.

18. How is e-learning being implemented across grade levels? How is it being implemented at the elementary level?

This depends upon the grade level and upon the individual teacher. Some teachers have emphasized packets of information. Others have worked through Zoom meetings, with individual contacts. Many have emphasized the instructional software packages and the e-textbooks provided to work through. While the district curriculum remains in place, just as when school is in regular session, individual teachers are offering different approaches to eLearning.

Generally, thought there will be some exceptions, Mitchell High School teachers can be reached through their contact information from 8:15-3:15 on school days.

19. What have we learned so far about our implementation of e-learning? What are the bright spots? What are the pitfalls?

While our teachers were prepared for eLearning from day 1 of the school closure, it remains true that implementation is definitely changing and evolving over time. We've learned that eLearning works very well for some students, very poorly for others who need physical proximity for ideal learning experiences. We've learned that there are ways of conducting eLearning that we had not considered or had not considered adequately in the past. As to bright spots and pitfalls, we are still identifying those. Hopefully, we'll have a full or fuller answer to that very good question going forward.

20. What are the actual numbers of participants in the meals program?

In general, the food service staff is providing between 2,500 and 3,000 meals per day. They are also providing multiple meals for weekends and holiday breaks. On April 9, for example, they distributed over 18,000 meals, intended to carry young people over for that date and the coming 4-day Easter weekend.

21. What is our plan for, if and when, there is a full "shelter in place" order given?

Based upon communications from the Governor's Office, it seems unlikely that such an order will occur, given the critical need for food service in all communities. However, we would simply abide by whatever restrictions were included should such an order be given.

22. Is it possible to offer furloughs to employees who cannot take option A or B (i.e., continue to work with pay or time off with pay), so they can file for unemployment?

Currently, employees whose typical work is not currently being called for (para-educators, some clerical), have three options:

- a. Work in food service/facility maintenance or bank their hours.
- b. Accept the offerings of paid sick leave under recent pronouncements from the federal government as part of the stimulus package.
- c. Accept none of the above, which is essentially to go on 'furlough.' It is doubtful but not impossible that this option, however, would qualify them for unemployment, though that would be a S.D. Department of Labor decision, not a local one.

23. How will students be registering for classes for next year?

Each building is currently establishing process for registering students for their courses/classrooms for the 2020-21 school year. Building principals will be in contact with students and parents once final details have been determined.

24. How and when can my student pick up their possessions from their classrooms and lockers?

Because of the impossibility of maintaining adequate social distancing if students were to come in to clean out lockers, student desks, etc., school employees will be bagging all personal items for eventual return. Building principals will be in contact with students and parents once final details for reclaiming student possessions have been determined.

That being said, the Mitchell Middle School bagged all student possession remaining in the school building and returned them to students/parents with a drive-up option on April 20-22. It is like the three elementary schools and the high school will return supplies once the school year is ended, which will occur on May 22, along with students returning their computer technology at the same time.

25. What will happen with students who do not complete and submit any assignments during the school closure and eLearning period of the last two months of the 2020 spring semester?

It is extremely discouraging that a question of this sort should even need to be asked.

‘Education,’ it is sometimes said, ‘is the only thing people want the *least* of for their money.’

People would instantly object if the checker at the grocery store were to remove a can of beans or bag of chips from the conveyor belt while still charging the customer for them. Yet, when a school day is shortened for bad weather or a teacher reduces the number of assignments or the books to be read, some students celebrate. Parents sometimes even request less rigorous classes, assignments, and tests for their children. All of this happens because students and other confuse the sign of learning, the grade (which has no actual value in and of itself), for the actual learning, what the student now knows and can do as a result of the teacher’s instruction and their hard work. It is a terrible confusion and a terrible mistake. Thus, if anything in this era of eLearning, when getting information across is more difficult than usual, students should be pitching in more than usual and parents should be engaging with their children more than usual.

To more specifically answer the question, K-8 students who fail to complete assignments risk being deemed not adequately prepared for the next grade level and thus suitable candidates for retention in their current grade level for the 2020-21 school year. At the high school level, such students risk receiving a failing grade in their class and delaying their date of graduation. For seniors, they risk not graduating on May 17, 2020.