

Philly schools forbid graded ‘remote instruction’ during shutdown

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Philly schools forbid graded ‘remote instruction’ during shutdown for equity concerns

By Avi Wolfman-Arent and Dale Mezzacappa

The School District of Philadelphia will not allow teachers to do “remote instruction” with students while schools are closed during the coronavirus outbreak, according to a letter sent to principals Tuesday night.

Because the district cannot ensure equal access to technology among students, it’s barring individual schools from providing graded virtual instruction.

“To ensure equity, remote instruction should not be provided to students, including through the internet, technology at home, by phone, or otherwise,” the letter read.

On Wednesday afternoon, after backlash and confusion among teachers, Superintendent William Hite clarified the district’s position, saying that teachers cannot require students to do work remotely or grade them on that work.

At a city press briefing on COVID-19, Hite said that the district would update its guidance and stressed that it is not prohibiting teachers from contacting students and their families, but rather encouraging it. However, due to access concerns, the district would prohibit “a requirement to log in, a requirement to take attendance, and a requirement to distribute grades. If that’s not available to all children, we cannot make that available to some,” Hite said.

In the Tuesday letter to principals, the district said:

“Students should not be required to complete new assignments or homework activities. Schools may not make independent decisions to offer remote instruction at this time. As guidance and circumstances continue to unfold, we will provide updates when necessary.”

The letter was signed by Naomi Wyatt, the district’s chief of staff, and Malika Savoy-Brooks, chief of academic support.

Philadelphia’s decision comes as school districts across the state grapple with what they are legally allowed to do during an unprecedented wave of school closures. Those decisions are laden with potential legal snags — including every school’s legal mandate to meet the needs of special-education students under federal law.

Wyatt and Savoy-Brooks cited guidance from the state and federal departments of education, saying that the district could not offer “remote instruction to some students unless we can serve all children.”

The district has created online learning guides that parents and caregivers can use while the schools are closed.

All public and charter schools in Pennsylvania are closed through March 27th.

District teachers are allowed to have remote contact with students during the shutdown, according to the guidance letter.

“Examples include reviewing student work, calling and/or being available for calls with families, developing lesson plans, creating ideas for ways to welcome students back when school reopens, participating in IEP and other meetings by conference call or online conferencing, virtual meetings or calls with school teams about climate issues, and working with data,” the letter read.

Some school districts in the region said before the shutdown that they would attempt some form of virtual education if the virus caused long-term closures. Others worried that they would not be able to provide equal access to technology or would run afoul of federal special education law if they attempted to provide online learning.

Prior to the virus outbreak, The Pennsylvania Department of Education did give about 80 school districts permission to hold “flexible instruction days,” often known colloquially as “cyber snow days.” The list of approved districts does not include the School District of Philadelphia, and includes relatively few districts from the surrounding suburbs.

PDE told school districts they do not need to offer instruction during the shutdown. But if districts do offer education services, they “must ensure full access to learning for all students, with particular attention to free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and English as a second language (ESL) services for English Learners.”

‘A more clear directive’

What exactly counts as instruction, though?

Teachers across Philadelphia — and the state — are wrestling with that question.

Zoe Rooney, a ninth-grade math teacher at a high school in Philadelphia, was confused by what is or isn’t allowed.

“A more clear directive — and one that is more specific about why — would be helpful,” she added.

For some teachers, the latest news has scuttled days of frantic work.

On Tuesday afternoon, a city teacher had just finished explaining with pride all the steps their high school had taken to maintain instruction for its several hundred students.

The staff had surveyed all the students to determine whether they had access to technology — somewhat to their surprise just about all of them did — and sent some school-based laptops home with those who had WiFi, but no computers.

The staff developed a plan for continuing to work on projects and scheduled some instruction via Google Classroom, which can be accessed on smartphones. They set deadlines for students to hand in assignments remotely. And they encouraged students to check in twice a week.

Not five minutes after hanging up with a reporter, the teacher called back in a panic.

“You can’t use my name, or my school’s name,” the teacher said. The principal had just received the school district’s guidance, and feared the school would be penalized for its work to keep students engaged.

‘Can’t stand still’

Nationally there has been widespread confusion about what schools can and can’t do legally while they’re closed, according to recent reporting from USA Today.

The Northshore School District near Seattle was one of the first to shutter, and said initially that it would provide virtual instruction to its 25,000 students. The district has since reversed course after receiving guidance from state leaders. In Rhode Island, however, schools are being asked to craft remote learning plans for students. And across the country, teachers are finding their own ways to keep the educational flame ablaze.

Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, believes schools should attempt to provide some form of education during this unprecedented shut down — even if it’s patchwork.

“The most dangerous thing school districts can do right now is just stand still and do nothing,” said Lake. “And unfortunately that’s what they’re being advised to do by a lot of state-level folks.”

Lake believes that withdrawing from instruction will create even more inequity. Families and districts with means will continue to provide educational opportunities for kids, she says, while lower-income districts will be frozen in place because they’re afraid of violating federal or state guidance.

“We’ve got to figure out how to serve all kids — absolutely,” she said. “But we can’t stand still in the meantime.”

The School District of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Department of Education did not immediately respond to requests for comment.



Discussion Questions

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1. Define: Equity, colloquially, cyber
2. In your opinion, is it fair that some students' education will be held back because some students don't have internet access? Explain why or why not.
3. In your opinion, is it fair that some students' who want to learn will be held back because they don't have internet access? Explain why or why not.
4. Do you think the Superintendent's initial guidance (no instruction at all) was well-thought through? Explain why or why not.
5. The Superintendent's next position was learning could occur, but no grades. Is this better than the first position? Why or why not?
6. If there are no grades, will the majority of students do the work? Explain your position.
7. Further clarification allowed that teachers could review or call families. Is this enough for learning to occur? Why or why not?
8. Some students may not have a phone, e.g. the Amish, had the line cut due to failure to pay the bill, can't afford, etc. Is it fair that phone teaching could go on if someone doesn't have a phone? Explain.
9. Are there other ways that learning materials could get to students that don't involve the internet? What are some ways that wouldn't involve significantly increasing the risk of spreading disease?
10. Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, said that the worst thing schools could do is to "stand still and do nothing." Agree or disagree, justifying your position.
11. If the CDC prediction is correct, that it could take 18 months for schools to return to normal, are schools going to not provide new instruction for a year? If that were the case, speculate as to what you think would happen.