

Should New Jersey schools close before their first case of coronavirus?

By [Adam Clark | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

Updated 6:31 PM; Today 12:11 PM



New Jersey colleges have canceled in-person classes and asked students to leave campus. Should K-12 schools be next? Nicole Hester/Mlive.com

Scott Taylor hasn't been this plugged into the news since Hurricane Sandy.

Taylor, superintendent of the Highland Park School District, is closely following the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in New Jersey, he said Wednesday. And his new ritual goes like this: Check email. Check nj.com. Check hyperlocal news sites. Click. Close. Repeat.

"I am monitoring the situation literally hour by hour," said Taylor, who oversees a district of 1,600 students. "At a moment's notice, if I had to close schools temporarily, I will."

On Thursday, that moment came. Highland Park announced it will close Friday for sanitizing of schools after a student came in contact with someone with a presumed positive case of the virus.

New Jersey's number of [presumed positive COVID-19 cases](#) is rising. The state's colleges have shifted to online classes. And all eyes are focused on K-12 schools, the vast majority of which remain open because no one in their communities is known to have the coronavirus.

Some health experts say schools should shut down immediately to limit community spread of the potentially fatal virus. But others say there's no reason to panic yet — schools instead should wait for evidence of presumed positive test results or definitive exposure before taking drastic steps.

Caught in between are school leaders like Taylor, hoping state and local health officials will tell educators when it's time to act.

"We know what's going to happen with a storm," Taylor said. "It's going to come. It's going to go. It's going to wreak havoc. We don't know a lot about infectious diseases, who has it, who doesn't have it..."

"It's unprecedented."

Ideally, schools would close before their first confirmed case of the coronavirus because that's the best way to limit the spread of a disease, said Stephanie Silvera, a professor of public health at Montclair State University.

Schools can be breeding grounds for community spread, with hundreds of people in close quarters, brushing up against each another, eating in communal spaces and not necessarily washing their hands. Even though children appear to be less affected by the coronavirus than adults, they could be passing it along to teachers, elderly relatives or parents with pre-existing health conditions, Silvera said.

“The evidence has shown that for infectious disease spread, closing the schools earlier really is one of the best methods,” said Silvera, who cited University of Michigan research on how cities responded to the Spanish Flu in 1918.

New Jersey’s major colleges, including Rutgers University, have already taken unprecedented action, [canceling in-person classes](#) and asking students to leave campus for at least two weeks, if not longer. But the state’s K-12 schools have closed only for presumed positive cases, like one [in the Red Bank Regional School District](#) — which closed after a high school student tested positive — or likely exposure that requires a closure for deep cleaning.

If schools want to shut down to prevent the potential spread of the virus, they would likely need to stay closed for 14 days, which is how long symptoms could appear after exposure, Silvera said. But that would be an extreme hardship for many families, knocking over a domino that would alter daily life across the state for parents and their employers.

“I think a lot of schools are trying to balance how much do we disrupt everyone’s lives versus how much of a risk might this be,” Silvera said. “Part of the issue here is that this is now new. For any new condition or illness there is a bit of a guessing game.”

The state Department of Education last week authorized all public schools

to offer "home instruction" days that can count toward the mandatory 180-day school year. But those days only count if schools are directed to close by state or local health officials. That guidance apparently has not come for precautionary social distancing to prevent community spread.

Some infectious disease experts have cautioned that there is not yet enough evidence to know that closing schools will prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

If schools close ahead of a presumed positive test, they would also need to stay closed after one, which creates the possibility of a month-long closure. Districts this week have been developing plans for as long as 30 days without in-person classes.

It's important that decision-makers set aside emotions when deciding when to close schools, said Suzanne Willard, associate dean of global health at Rutgers School of Nursing.

"There is a lot of panic out there, and it is best not to make any kind of decisions with panic," Willard said. "This is a novel thing. This is new, but you can't stop living your life."

In Highland Park, Taylor said he would first use the remaining snow days built into the school calendar to temporarily shut down schools while allowing health officials to assess the situation.

"I wouldn't do anything until I consulted health officials," he said. "I recognize that I am not an expert in this."

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