



Montclair schools begin preparations for possible coronavirus outbreak



IMAGE COURTESY DARKO STOJANOVIC/PIXABAY Montclair's schools are starting preparations in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in Montclair.

By ERIN ROLL

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Montclair schools have been instructed by the state Department of Education to develop a preparedness plan to deal with a possible outbreak of the novel coronavirus COVID-19.

Officials stress that while the current risk for exposure remains “low,” and there are no plans to cancel classes at this time, school districts should begin planning for complications caused by school closures, including the provision of home instruction, special education and nutritional services, and the limiting of large gatherings like sporting events and assemblies.

Interim Superintendent Nathan Parker said during the March 4 Board of Education meeting that there had been early discussions about setting up off-site learning centers in the event of a school closure. Days on which students have access to home instruction services will be counted toward the 180-day requirement, according to the state DOE, but this applies only to a public health closing related to COVID-19, and not to any other type of closure.

Schools will only be closed if the New Jersey Department of Health or the local health officer issues a written directive to the school district.

The first reported case of COVID-19 in New Jersey, involving a Fort Lee healthcare worker who works in New York City, was announced on Tuesday, March 3. State officials have announced two further presumptive cases since then, including one today, Friday, March 6, involving a man in his 60s living in Camden County, in southern New Jersey.

Yesterday, March 5, a letter co-signed by Parker and district Nursing Supervisor Betty Strauss announced that a district employee and their spouse had been tested for exposure to COVID-19. Both individuals tested negative for the virus, according to the letter.

The district says it is following state Department of Health guidelines and urged parents to update their contact information, and to ensure that a parent or emergency contact can pick up a sick student within a half-hour.

The letter encouraged families to practice healthy habits, including regular hand-washing with soap and water for 20 seconds. The Centers for Disease Control also recommend that people maintain distance from anyone coughing and sneezing; avoid touching your eyes, mouth or nose; stay home when you are sick except to get medical care; and clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

Events such as field trips are being evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and custodial staff is “increasing the level of cleaning and disinfecting” in school buildings.

The guidance also advises school administrators to be aware of any stigma or bias associated with COVID-19.

“In this climate, fear and anxiety surrounding COVID-19 can lead to stigma toward Chinese, other Asian Americans, and the Jewish community,” the NJDOE said. “The NJDOE encourages all educators and members of the public to recommit to raising awareness of the deep educational and personal harm brought by stigma, bullying and harassment in our schools, and to spreading factual public health information without fear or

stigmatization.”

Montclair State University has suspended all travel by employees and students to countries deemed Level 3 and 4 risk regions by the CDC, which includes China, Italy, South Korea and Iran. Students who have recently returned from those regions are asked to self-quarantine for 14 days after returning home. MSU President Susan Cole said that there are currently only 11 students, who are returning from Italy, to whom the rule would apply.

However, travel restrictions for state employees announced by Acting Gov. Sheila Oliver Thursday do not apply to Montclair State employees, university spokesperson Erika Bleiberg said Friday. The state is suspending all international travel for state employees until further notice, while domestic travel, including day trips, must be approved by the governor’s office.

“Members of the Montclair State University community are reminded that although this infection is a serious public health concern, the immediate health risk to the general U.S. public is still considered low at this time. There have been no risks identified on our campus. There is far more risk of getting sick from the flu in the United States than getting the new coronavirus.”

The university has set up an [information page](#), with links to the CDC and the World Health Organization, for information and updates related to COVID-19.