

Press Release: Contact: Cathy Parker, (209)536-2010

**April 3, 2020, Sonora:** School facilities in Tuolumne County will remain closed for the remainder of the 19/20 school year. Distance Learning for the remainder of the 2019-20 School Year will be in effect. *It is important to understand we are not ending the school year and we are continuing the essential work of teaching and learning for all Tuolumne County public school students.*

On Monday, March 16, school districts, in consultation with the County Public Health Officer, across Tuolumne County made the difficult decision to temporarily dismiss students and close campuses in response to COVID-19 fears and calls for social distancing. The closure was extended to April 14<sup>th</sup> and most recently through May 1<sup>st</sup> in order to provide staff, school boards, students and families an opportunity to prepare and implement structures and resources that would allow for instruction and other school services to continue for the remainder of the year. We appreciate the community's patience over the last few days as we have worked with these important stakeholder groups, including the County Public Health Officer, to formalize the complex decision to close all Tuolumne County public school campuses for the remainder of the year. It is difficult to fathom that just a short while ago we would be implementing the physical closures of schools for the rest of the academic year. As the guidance from the CDC has evolved and we have seen the spread of the virus move across the world and country, it has become apparent that hand washing and social distancing alone may not be the solution we are all seeking.

We are entering a new level of understanding of the COVID-19 threat and while Tuolumne County has not experienced the impact felt in other areas of our country or state, it is time to address the reality that our determination to flatten the curve and to keep students safe cannot be accomplished in the span of a few months. Wednesday's statements from Governor Gavin Newsom and State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond, support our districts' decision to cancel student attendance on campuses through the end of this academic year and devote a tremendous amount of time and energy toward the development of relevant, flexible, and effective distance learning models. **It is important to understand we are not ending the school year and we are continuing the essential work of teaching and learning for all Tuolumne County public school students.** Only the physical sites are closed. Educational and meal services will continue to be provided through the end of the regular 19/20 school year.

Over the last few weeks, the educators of Tuolumne County have been communicating with each other, building lessons and designing learning experiences that support academic continuity. Knowing that closure for the remaining school year was becoming more likely, teachers and support staff across the county have been making a tremendous leap into on-line learning platforms, accessing paper/pencil-based quality work, and even television, to develop instructional materials that build knowledge and skills, allow for students to submit work for feedback, support equity and socioemotional learning, and encourage teachers and students to stay connected in this challenging environment. It is extremely fatiguing work and the community should be proud of how the educators have risen to the challenge.

The enormity of the challenge is not lost on educational leaders at the county, state or federal level. We are more aware than ever of the digital divide that exists in rural California and other parts of the state. The funding provided by SB117 (COVID-19 Relief bill) is inadequate and does not begin to address the funding needed for additional devices and internet access our students deserve. At the same time, we also are extremely fortunate to have community and state partners who are readying to stand by and provide support. State leaders have signaled their commitment to guaranteeing widespread access to the internet as Governor Newsom on Wednesday announced a partnership with Google to provide 100,000 high-quality wireless access points and thousands of Chromebooks for students with a focus on rural areas. The College Board is teaching scores of AP subjects online. Access Tuolumne (Comcast Channel 8) is airing locally teacher created content. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, state colleges and K-12 systems have issued a joint statement on college admissions and placement agreements which include a re-evaluation of the financial needs for families whose circumstances have changed, acceptance of credit/no-credit grades in lieu of grades for the spring/summer 2020, and other flexibilities that are designed to hold students harmless in a situation not of their own making. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, the CDE released guidelines around grading

and graduation with State Board of Education President Linda Darling-Hammond stating, “All seniors who are on track for graduation should be able to graduate. This new guidance further illustrates how students can and should be held harmless in grading, and how their work can be acknowledged.” The [CDE guidance](#) has also provided guidance emphasizing that “LEAs should weigh their policies with the lens of equity and with the primary goal of first, doing no harm to students,” but providing the flexibility to districts to provide feedback to students.

We know our high school seniors and eighth grade students have been looking forward to celebrating graduation and promotion with events and ceremonies. These are momentous occasions and we want to reassure students and parents that district and school leaders will be planning how they can offer these experiences in different formats and/or at a later date. Expect in the coming weeks information about how grades, graduation, transcripts, scholarships, and continued distance learning instruction will be handled from each of your districts.

While we recognize the closing of school facilities carries challenges and places a hardship on many families in Tuolumne County, the most effective way to interrupt the spread of this pandemic is by persistent implementation of social distancing practices. We are grateful to our community for their tremendous support during this unique and challenging time.

Sincerely,

*Cathy Parker, Tuolumne County Superintendent of Schools*  
*Carla Haakma, Superintendent, Belleview School District*  
*Wynette Hilton, Superintendent, Big Oak Flat Groveland School District*  
*Joe Aldridge, Superintendent, Columbia Union School District*  
*Terri Bell, Superintendent, Curtis Creek School District*  
*Contessa Pelfrey, Superintendent, Jamestown Elementary School District*  
*Leigh Shampain, Superintendent, Sonora School District*  
*Mark Miller, Superintendent, Sonora Union High School District*  
*Jeff Winfield, Superintendent, Soulsbyville School District*  
*Ben Howell, Superintendent, Summerville Elementary School District*  
*Mike Merrill, Superintendent, Summerville Union High School district*  
*Rick Hennes, Superintendent, Twain Harte School District*  
*Ron Hamilton, Director, Gold Rush Charter School*