Dear Charter Leaders, Business Managers and Board Chairs,

The Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign sends you all our best wishes of health and safety to you and your school communities during the COVID-19 emergency.

This update includes information about remote learning, providing students with disabilities with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), an update on pre-enrollment, sibling and waitlist data submissions, a SEL and mental health webinar opportunity, as well as Q&A from recent Commissioner calls with Charter Leaders. Please share with your staff as necessary.

Best,

-Lee DeLorenzo

# Extended Statewide Closure and Department’s Remote Learning Recommendations

On Wednesday, the Governor announced that schools will remain closed until Monday, May 4. On Thursday, the Commissioner issued recommendations to assist in developing remote learning plans. Please find those recommendations attached. These guiding principles and recommendations serve as a baseline. We expect charter schools to modify them as needed to fit unique needs. The goal is to implement these remote learning plans by early April, if you have not already begun doing so.

On Friday, March 27, the Commissioner held the (now weekly) noon call with charter leaders. He answered a number of questions from the charter community. Those questions and his answers are found at the bottom of this email. You should be receiving invitations to the Commissioner’s weekly noon call.

Today, the Commissioner’s “On the Desktop” message included a letter from the Commissioner to Massachusetts families about the mandated school closure. The Commissioner has asked that you share this letter with families. Please see here for Spanish and English versions of the letters (will be posted shortly): <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/>

* Please let Lee know if you are not receiving these invitations sent to the Charter Leader distribution list: Leee.delorenzo@mass.gov.
* Additionally, if you have already created a remote learning plan and would like to share it with us as an example to highlight on our website, please contact Esther Jeong at Esther.Jeong@mass.gov.
* The Department’s COVID-19 page has been significantly revised and now provides a number of updates in one location with many sub-sites. Please visit this page frequently to see updates: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/ccte.html>

# FY21 Pre-Enrollment Report for Superintendents of Districts Sending Students to Charter Schools and Sibling Data

Thank you again for submitting your FY21 Pre-Enrollment report. For FY21 there are 49,276 pre-enrolled charter school students! Please note that the Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign will submit FY21 pre-enrollment information to the superintendents of districts sending students to charter schools by April 1.

Charter schools that received an extension to submit sibling data should contact Joanna Laghetto to finalize this work Joanna.C.Laghetto@mass.gov.

* See [2020-2021 Charter School Pre-Enrollment Report](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/fy2021/) and [FY21 Charter School Pre-Enrollment Data](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/fy2021/pre-enroll.xlsx).

# FY21 Waitlist Submissions

The Department is still accepting waitlist submissions if your school has not yet submitted the information via the security portal.

* If you have any questions regarding waitlist collection, please contact Brenton Stewart, Brenton.Stewart@mass.gov.

# New Guidance for Providing Students with Disabilities with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) during Mandated School Closures

The Office of Special Education Planning and Policy (SEPP) has been responding to changes at the state and federal levels by creating guidance documents and providing resources to clarifying the need to provide students with disabilities with access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) during this period of emergency school closures. SEPP held a series of meetings last week and shared an [updated FAQ guidance document](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/sped.html), a [PowerPoint presentation](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/2020-0320sped-directors.pptx) that is aligned with [USED Supplemental Fact Sheet (released 3/21)](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf) and the Commissioner’s guidance on distance learning released last week, and an update on [MCAS-Alt Portfolio](http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=25986) submissions.

* Please visit the SEPP [website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/sped.html) often for the most up to date information and new resources and guidance documents focused on special education.

# Upcoming Webinar: Supporting Students’ SEL and Mental Health Needs in the COVID-19 Era

**Date:**March 31, 2020 (10-11:30am ET)

**Description**

The Department is working with partners to offer an OPTIONAL, 90-minute webinar about how districts can address the mental health needs of students and support their Social & Emotional Learning (SEL) growth during these uncertain times. Topics covered will include the impact of school closures on students’ mental health, strategies for supporting students virtually, and online resources to help students develop SEL competencies while school is out. The first half of the webinar will include brief presentations from SEL and mental health experts, a review of available resources, and opportunities for participants to ask questions of the presenters. The second half will be a facilitated conversation where participants can express challenges and share additional resources, ideas, and supports with one another. This webinar will be recorded.

* Registration: <https://events-na1.adobeconnect.com/content/connect/c1/1002235226/en/events/event/shared/2621187410/event_landing.html?connect-session=na1breez3srkkmmmk84ksqg9&sco-id=3567151899&_charset_=utf-8>

# Charter School Changes Made in Response to Remote Learning Recommendations

Charter schools are not required to seek charter amendments to educational programs, curriculum models, or whole school designs in response to the implementation of remote learning due to school closures ordered by the Commonwealth. Actions taken by schools to effectively implement remote learning aligned with recommendations made by the Department are likely to be consistent with the material terms of the school's charter.

* If you have specific concerns related to changes to your school's educational program in response to the school's obligations to provide remote learning opportunities to students, please contact Alison Bagg, Alison.W.Bagg@mass.gov, or Alyssa Hopkins, Alyssa.K.Hopkins@mass.gov.

# Friday, March 27, 2020 – Commissioner and Charter School Leader Call

1. **MCAS (Q:** Are there any updates on the decision to delay/cancel MCAS?  What is the timeline for that decision to be made?)

A: The Department must adhere to federal and state laws with regard to annual testing. The Department has applied for a waiver from the US Department of Education with regard to federal testing requirements and has received assurances that this will be granted. Additionally, last week the Governor filed legislation seeking relief from state testing requirements. We are hoping for some decision this week and will update stakeholders as soon as possible.

1. **Faithfulness to the Charter** (**Q:** Will all temporary charter amendments for key design elements that cannot be implemented in a truncated school year to go into annual reports, similar to the number of days in session?)

**A:** Charter schools are not required to seek charter amendments to educational programs, curriculum models, or whole school designs in response to the implementation of remote learning due to school closures ordered by the Commonwealth. Actions taken by schools to implement remote learning aligned with my recommendations are likely to be consistent with the material terms of the school's charter.

If you have specific concerns related to changes to your school's educational program in response to the school's obligations to provide remote learning opportunities to students, please contact Alison Bagg, Alison.W.Bagg@mass.gov, or Alyssa Hopkins, Alyssa.K.Hopkins@mass.gov.

1. **Accountability Plans** (**Q**: How are school closures impacting accountability plans?  Is DESE going to waive measures within school accountability plans for 2019-2020 and/or provide extension for measures to be completed within the charter term?  If not, how should schools report compromised measures in annual reports?)

**A**: If you are unable to meet an accountability plan measure due to the state mandated closure, that is understandable. Please note in your Annual Report that the state mandated closure/or other disruption due to coronavirus interfered with the school’s ability to implement specific programming or meet a specific measure in the accountability plan.

If you have questions about specific measures in your accountability plan and how to report on them in the upcoming 2019-20 Annual Report, please contact Esther Jeong at Esther.Jeong@mass.gov

If you have questions about how to write about a disruption to your mission or implementation of key design elements in the upcoming 2019-20 Annual Report, please contact Patrick Buckwalter at Patrick.L.Buckwalter@mass.gov

1. **Enrollment** (Q: Schools need guidance and/or flexibility on conducting lotteries in the virtual context.

**A**: At this time, all charter schools have conducted their primary enrollment lotteries. IF you have specific questions about conducting subsequent lotteries (which may be required if seats are available and no initial waitlist was established or your initial waitlist was exhausted) during this time of state mandated closure, please contact Brenton Stewart at Brenton.Stewart@mass.gov.

1. **Student Opportunity Act** (Q: There is a component under SOA where districts are required to get families and other stakeholder input on plans. Given that guidance about SOA implementation in charter schools is not yet released, and in-person school operations are now closed until at least May 4, how do you envision that will be achieved? Can this portion (community engagement) be waived for the current year, given charter timelines and the inability to access families in person?

**A**: At the moment, none of the SOA requirements have been waived. Charter school guidance on SOA implementation will be very similar to what is expected for districts and will be released soon. The law requires the engagement of parents/guardians, including the Special Education and English Learner PACs. As far as community engagement, charter schools could think of creative ways to engage stakeholder beyond what our online guidance already states: via online surveys or by asking stakeholders to email input to a dedicated email address.

1. **Nutrition** (Q: For those schools who have lower than 50% low income and are not getting reimbursement for providing meals, is there any chance this can be waived and those schools can also receive reimbursements?)

**A:** The Department learned on Sunday, March 29 that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has approved DESE’s request to waive the requirement that school meal sites must be located in areas where at least 50 percent of school lunch program participants are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Therefore, **all school districts that are distributing meals during school closures related to COVID-19 and are focusing the distribution of these meals to children and teens in need of them are now eligible for USDA reimbursement**. Further details will be released later this week.

Also remember, every one of the non-congregate meal sites currently open are “open” sites meaning that any enrolled student or student from a neighboring town can take a meal to go. Therefore, any school that is not serving meals currently to their students (whether by choice or not eligible for reimbursement) can direct their students to a site near them. There currently are nearly 1,200 sites on Project Bread’s School Closure Meal Site Finder tool: <http://www.meals4kids.org/schoolclosure>

# Friday, March 20, 2020 - Answers in response to questions from Commissioner call with Charter Leaders

1. **MTEL requirement and Charters**

We recognize that school and MTEL testing site closures may have affected charter school educators who must pass the MTEL in their first year of employment.

In accountability documents, charter school office staff will note that the April MTELs were cancelled and schools will not be held accountable for any teacher who is employed in 2020-21 without passing MTELs. See our guidance about [charter school educator qualifications](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/guidance/2020-1.html), for additional information about typical requirements.

Additionally, Governor Baker has issued an [executive order extending licenses](https://www.mass.gov/doc/eo-on-license-registration-extension-dpl-opsi/download) for certain licensed professionals, including licensed educators. The order states that a license that is “in good standing” as of March 18, 2020, and that has expired or will expire during the state of emergency, is now extended and will remain valid until 90 days after the end of the state of emergency.

1. **Paying hourly employees**

I strongly recommend that charter schools pay their hourly employees during the current emergency school closure. Like all of us, these employees need to follow public health directives and take care of themselves and their families. While they do so, schools could ask them to continue their learning by reading educational articles, books, taking an online class or performing other tasks that could be a benefit to the school districts.

For the benefit of the students we serve, I believe it will be important to maintain continuity of operations during the period of school closures. You must be able to quickly resume providing services to students as soon as schools re-open. In order for schools to accomplish that, they will need to have an available, ready work force, including hourly employees.

# New MA Charter School COVID-19 Webpage

* **COVID-19 Information and Resources for MA Charter Schools**: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/>

*This new Massachusetts Charter School COVID-19 webpage will be updated as information and resources become available.*