

November 14, 2018

Dear Community Member:

On behalf of the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) and the 40 school districts of Sonoma County, I would like to thank you for your patience and adaptability as schools close due to air quality concerns. We recognize that school closures create inconvenience by taxing family schedules. It is our desire to keep children in school whenever possible so that learning can continue while also taking every step possible to ensure student safety. We have seen that air quality concerns due to wildfires are becoming more and more frequent. This has prompted the need for schools to establish common procedures for how to deal with this so that families can know what to expect.

For this reason, SCOE and the school districts of Sonoma County met Tuesday, Nov. 13, to adopt guidelines for when schools should cancel classes due to poor air quality. School districts agreed to use these guidelines as they determine whether to cancel classes. The following guidelines utilize the Environmental Protection Agency Air Quality Index (AQI) numbers as well as guidance for schools from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). They are based on standards previously established by Santa Rosa City Schools as well as those of nearby counties.

Under these guidelines, districts will:

- Consult the website purpleair.com at 5:00am on the day of the closure.
- Consider cancelling classes at an AQI of 275 or higher.
- Report closures to SCOE. SCOE will report them to the media and on scoe.org.
- Report closures to affected families through pre-established channels.

Why the level 275? Although an AQI level of 301 is the threshold for “Hazardous” air quality for adults, since students are ages 4-18, a lower level was considered appropriate. This came in consultation with the county health director as well as guidance from the CDC with an understanding that air quality tends to worsen as the day progresses.

Why decide at 5:00am? It is difficult to make an accurate prediction of the AQI the night before. These major decisions must be made with the best information available, and that information is not available until the morning.

Generally, we believe that students are in a safer air quality environment when they are in school. This is because schools typically use filtered air while many homes may not have this ability. As well, students have greater opportunities for indoor activity. While these standards provide a baseline for districts when considering the cancellation of classes, it is ultimately each district’s decision to determine what is best for their students and staff. Local factors could include availability of quality air filtration as well as regional air quality.

Based on our research, we have learned that experts are still working to determine the best websites for monitoring the risks of smoke as well as the best actions for ensuring public health. Should new information arise, these guidelines may be adapted to align with best practices.

Sincerely,



Steven D. Herrington
Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools

Steven D. Herrington | Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools

Board of Education | Gina Cuclis, Herman G. Hernandez, Peter Kostas, Andrew Leonard, Lisa Wittke Schaffner