

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## **PRESS RELEASE**

(OROVILLE, CA) – Today, March 19, 2020 in a press conference at Butte County Public Health Department, Mary Sakuma, Butte County Superintendent of Schools announced that she has made the decision to close schools through Friday, April 17, 2020. In an abundance of caution, Butte County schools are following the advice and counsel from the experts at the CDC and public health: maintain safe social distancing and protect ourselves from getting sick and from us inadvertently infecting others.

Services and resources including food and nutrition, child care, counseling and mental health supports will still be available to our students and families.

- **Food and Nutrition Services:** During this closure, there will be an opportunity for families to pick up free “grab-and-go” meals at 26 locations throughout Butte County for children 18 and under beginning today, Thursday, March 19 through the time when schools are back in session. Meal service dates and times will vary, please see district and charter school websites for exact information.
- **Reminders about Personal Hygiene:** Wash hands, maintain safe social distancing, and protect ourselves from getting sick.
- **Child Care:** An interagency group is meeting today for a preliminary conversation.
- **Support for Families with Students at Home, including Students with Special Needs:** Optional activities for now, with Long-term Planning for High Quality Distance Learning is in the works.
- **Counseling and Mental Health Services:** We are moving toward a virtual model.

## Speech Outline for Mary Sakuma

### Press Conference 3-19-2020

Good morning,

My name is Mary Sakuma, and I am proud to serve as your Butte County Superintendent of Schools.

Unfortunately, Butte County has had to develop a lot of on-the-job expertise in dealing with crises and emergencies. Fear of floods, escaping from firestorms, and now some waiting in isolation as the COVID-19 threat dissipates, have given us teachable moments and opportunities to use our knowledge to meet the challenge of the Coronavirus head on.

The Butte school community has learned to be resilient. We've learned to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. And we've learned that we can count on each other when times are tough.

Well, times are certainly tough right now and we are counting on everyone to do their part to minimize the risk of spreading this deadly disease.

The only way to flatten the curve of infection from this contagion is to follow the advice and counsel from the experts at the CDC and public health: stay home, maintain safe social distancing, and protect ourselves from getting sick and from us inadvertently infecting others.

In an abundance of caution, and again in consultation with school leaders across the county, at this time I have made a decision to **close our schools through Friday, April 17<sup>th</sup>**. This decision was not made lightly because it carries plenty of ramifications for our students, families and employees. However, it is the right thing to do.

Shutting down school does not mean that we must shut down valuable services for our students and families. Butte County Office of Education has been meeting continuously in an Emergency Operations Center to make sure we can mobilize services and resources for families and children in need, even while they are at home.

Our Butte County children are some of the most vulnerable in the state. We have an incredibly high poverty rate. Many of our families depend on public schools not only for a quality educational experience, but also as a vital direct lifeline and safety net through the other important services we provide, including food and nutrition, child care, counseling and mental health supports. Butte County Office of Education recognizes the hardships our families and students are experiencing and will continue to provide the following services during this unprecedented time. Here is what we are working on:

### **Food and Nutrition Services**

During this closure, there will be an opportunity for families to pick up free “grab-and-go” meals at 26 locations throughout Butte County for children 18 and under beginning today, Thursday, March 19 through the time when schools are back in session. Meal service dates and times will vary, please see District and charter school websites for exact information.

These meals will be available for free for anyone 18 and under regardless of what school they attend. No paperwork is required. Meals will be provided based on the number of children present.

We encourage families to continue to be proactive in reducing the risk of COVID-19 by not congregating at the meal sites and continuing to

utilize social distancing. For this reason, all meals are designed to be “grab-and-go” and meals will not be consumed on-site.

### **Communication about personal hygiene and healthy practices**

No one is immune to COVID-19. Regardless of your age, you can catch the virus if you are exposed to it. While we don't have any confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Butte County yet, the threat remains. We cannot say it enough: wash your hands (for a minimum of 20 seconds), sanitize your surroundings, maintain social distancing, and stay home even if you are not sick. Everyone can take these steps to slow the spread of infection. It is essential and it's the only way we can effectively combat this virus. See our website for further advice of taking care of yourself and others.

### **Child Care services**

Quality child care is another aspect of the continuum of services and learning opportunities we provide for young children and youth in extended learning settings. An interagency group of community stakeholders are 'meeting' today for a preliminary conversation. This dialog will begin to identify the status of services in our county and discuss how to approach the dynamic situation ahead. We covered this ground in the aftermath of the Camp Fire and we are ramping up to do it again facing this pandemic.

### **Support for families with Students at Home, including students with Special Needs**

Educators are already hard at work creating optional enrichment activities to provide to students during the school closure, while

preparing for the larger transition to distance learning options and supporting all students, including students with disabilities. We still have questions for the state and federal government, but we are getting more answers each day.

In terms of special education, Butte County Office of Education and Butte County SELPA have been in close contact with Local Education Agencies' special education leadership. We continue to provide them the latest information, resources, and guidance in these difficult times.

First and foremost, we are prioritizing for our providers the importance of communication and maintaining relationships with students and families. Many of them are already reaching out to families to let them know that we are here for them. We don't have all the answers at this time on how to get through this crisis, but we are working on it.

### **Counseling and Mental Health Services**

Butte County Office of Education is developing strategies and a variety of resources to support everyone in our school community. As these resources become available, we will post them on our website:

BCOE.ORG. Counseling services for students who were impacted by the Camp Fire will begin to move to a virtual format.

### **In Closing:**

The big question on everyone's mind is, "How long will school closures last?" The candid answer is, "We aren't sure." As the tentative end of the closure, April 17<sup>th</sup>, draws closer, we will reassess the parameters of our decision. But be assured, we will not reopen schools unless we are sure we can provide a safe and healthy learning environment for our students and staff.

One thing we've learned in this crisis is that we're just going to have to get comfortable being uncomfortable for a while. This is a very fluid situation, changing almost hourly. We ask for your patience, understanding and support as we navigate through these uncharted waters together as a community of one.