

November 14, 2018

Dear Community Members:

I want to thank those of you who have reached out regarding the air quality guidelines issued by the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) on Tuesday, Nov. 13. I understand your serious concerns for the safety and wellbeing of Sonoma County's children as poor air quality persists in our region. As the county superintendent, I share your concerns for our students' wellbeing.

The guidelines released on Tuesday reflect the earnest efforts of the majority of Sonoma County's superintendents, in consultation with the county's public health director, to arrive at a common benchmark that can be used as a guide to determine when classes should be canceled. SCOE held this meeting at local school districts' request. In the absence of a state standard for school closures due to air quality, there was a desire for a consensus that all could follow—especially as it became clear that air quality concerns would continue to be an issue for our community. This is an evolving challenge for school districts across the state and there are simply no easy answers. Should new information or guidance become available, school districts will review these guidelines at that time.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Each school district is autonomous and *the decision to close school ultimately rests with each district*. While these guidelines are meant to help districts in their decision-making, districts must make the final call based on the air quality in their specific area of the county, as well as other local factors. These include but are not limited to: quality of the air filtration systems; distance students need to walk between classes; and student transportation. Should districts have concerns about any of these issues, they may choose to close at a lower threshold.

Below, I will address the most common questions and concerns we have received.

Why set the threshold at 275 AQI?

School districts came to a consensus to use a threshold of a 275 air quality index (AQI) when determining when to close school based on guidance from the county's public health director as well as guidelines for schools from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The EPA and CDC recommend that certain activities be curtailed when smoke levels get as high as they have been recently in Sonoma County, but they do not recommend closures.

We recognize that 275 AQI is an unhealthy air quality level. However, that does not mean that children are necessarily better off at home than at school in those conditions. Often times air quality is better at school than at home. Most schools have high-quality air filtration systems, while many homes do not.

We have received and heard your concerns about the threshold selected for school closures and reasoning behind selecting that threshold. I can confidently say that SCOE, as well as each school district in Sonoma County, sees its priority as ensuring student wellbeing. This decision was based on the guidance and understanding that air quality is generally the same as or better at school than it is at home. As well, when schools are closed, many students are left unsupervised while parents work, creating additional risks and exposures for them. Finally, based on past experience, we believe that school districts that choose to close because of air quality concerns will likely be reimbursed by the state department of education.

Why is the threshold higher than that used in Napa County?

As some have noted, this threshold is higher than Napa County's guideline. This is because we are using a different air monitoring site (PurpleAir.com); which was chosen because it is updated more frequently, measures particulate matter (PM2.5) and has more localized data. The challenge with using PurpleAir.com is that state experts acknowledge the readings are not calibrated and run higher than other recommended sites such as AirNow.gov. However, since the readings are more localized, we believe this is the best tool for Sonoma County. Therefore, we took into account the higher readings when choosing to set the 275 AQI threshold.

Why aren't schools distributing air masks to students?

Schools have been advised by public health officials that the only mask that can safely protect from particulate matter such as that found in wildfire smoke is an N95 respirator. However, these masks are meant to be worn by those with occupational exposure *and are not designed for children*. Also, without having had a "fit test" while wearing this mask, individual users cannot be sure that it fits well enough to provide the expected protection.

Will SCOE and school districts revise the 275 AQI threshold?

At this time, we plan to adhere to the consensus agreed on by the county's superintendents with guidance from the county's public health director. As noted earlier, each school district is autonomous and the decision to close school ultimately rests with them.

Do school districts have to follow these guidelines?

No. These guidelines are intended to assist school districts in their decision-making, but ultimately the choice is up to each individual school district based on local conditions.

Does my child have to go to school?

If parents disagree with their district's decision, they may choose to keep their children at home. Ultimately, parents know what is best for their child based on his or her health needs.

If I keep my child home because of health concerns, will the absence be excused?

This is a district-by-district decision. Please consult with your school or district to determine their policies regarding absences.

How do I know the quality of my school's air filtration system?

Your school or district can provide information about air filtration and the status of school facilities.

Thank you again for your concern and outreach. SCOE welcomes your comments and concerns and will continue to look for the best possible guidance in determining when school districts should close due to air quality concerns. This is an evolving challenge for school districts across the state and there are simply no easy answers. Should new information or guidance become available, school districts will review these guidelines at that time.

Sincerely,



Steven D. Herrington
Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools



14 de noviembre de 2018

Estimado/a miembro de la Comunidad:

De parte de la Oficina de Educación del Condado de Sonoma (SCOE) y los 40 distritos escolares del Condado de Sonoma, me gustaría darle las gracias por su paciencia y flexibilidad por el cierre de escuelas debido a las preocupaciones relativas a la calidad del aire. Reconocemos que los cierres escolares crean inconvenientes al afectar a los horarios familiares. Nuestro deseo es mantener a los estudiantes en las escuelas cuando es posible, para que el aprendizaje pueda continuar, mientras también hacemos todo lo posible por garantizar la seguridad de los estudiantes. Hemos visto que las preocupaciones relativas a la calidad del aire debido a los incendios se están haciendo más frecuentes. Esto ha llevado a que las escuelas necesiten establecer procedimientos comunes sobre cómo gestionar esto, para que las familias sepan qué pueden esperar.

Por esta razón, el SCOE y los distritos escolares del Condado de Sonoma se reunieron el martes 13 de noviembre, para adoptar directrices relativas a cuándo las escuelas deben cancelar las clases debido a la mala calidad del aire. Los distritos escolares acordaron usar estas directrices para determinar si cancelar las clases o no. Las siguientes directrices utilizan los números del Índice de Calidad del Aire (AQI) de la Agencia de Protección Medioambiental, así como orientaciones para las escuelas de los Centros de Control de Enfermedades (CDC). Se basan en estándares previamente establecidos por las Escuelas de la Ciudad de Santa Rosa, así como los de condados cercanos.

En base a estas directrices, los distritos:

- Consultarán la página web purpleair.com a las 5:00am del día del cierre.
- Considerarán la cancelación de las clases con un AQI de 275 o más.
- Informarán sobre los cierres a la SCOE. La SCOE informará a los medios de comunicación y lo publicará en scoe.org.
- Se informará sobre los cierres a las familias afectadas a través de los canales preestablecidos.

¿Por qué el nivel de 275? Aunque un nivel AQI de 301 es el límite de calidad del aire "Peligrosa" para adultos, dado que los estudiantes tienen edades comprendidas entre los 4-18 años, se consideró que un nivel inferior era apropiado. Esto se estableció en consulta con el director de salud del condado, así como en base a orientaciones del CDC, teniendo presente que la calidad del aire tiende a empeorar a medida que el día progresa.

¿Por qué decidir a las 5:00am? Es difícil hacer una predicción precisa del AQI la noche anterior. Estas decisiones importantes deben realizarse con la mejor información disponible, y esta información no está disponible hasta la mañana.

Generalmente, consideramos que los estudiantes están en un entorno con una calidad del aire más segura cuando están en la escuela. Esto es porque las escuelas normalmente usan aire filtrado, mientras que muchos hogares no tienen esta capacidad. Asimismo, los estudiantes tienen mayores oportunidades para realizar actividades en espacios interiores. Aunque estos estándares proporcionan una base de referencia para los distritos al considerar la posibilidad de cancelar las clases, en última instancia es decisión de cada distrito

determinar lo que es mejor para sus estudiantes y miembros del personal. Factores locales pueden incluir la disponibilidad de filtración de aire de calidad, así como la calidad del aire regional.

En base a nuestra investigación, hemos visto que los expertos aún están trabajando para determinar cuáles son las mejores páginas web para controlar los riesgos relacionados con el humo, así como las mejores acciones posibles para garantizar la salud pública. Si hubiera nueva información, estas directrices pueden ser adaptadas para alinearse con las mejores prácticas.

Atentamente,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Herrington". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Steven D. Herrington
Superintendente de Escuelas del Condado de Sonoma