

SDUSD to launch online classes, grading by April 27

District to distribute nearly 40,000 laptops, hotspots



Natalie Ortega, 10, from Perkins Elementary School used a laptop to do her math assignment last month. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)

By Kristen Taketa

San Diego Unified will officially start conducting school online beginning on April 27.

It is one of the first large area districts to announce a plan to return to grading and formal instruction.

“San Diego Unified will return to instruction next month to guarantee students an opportunity to successfully complete the current academic year, even as physical school facilities will remain closed until public health officials determine it is safe for students to return to classrooms,” the district said in a statement Tuesday.

The district's plan is meant to answer the concerns of many students about whether they'll be able to finish the school year or complete course credits to move on to the next grade or graduate.

"The schedule outlined today by the district will give members of the Class of 2020 the assurance they need that they will graduate, whether or not public health officials approve a return to in-classroom instruction," the district of 103,000 students said in the statement.

The timeline means most students will get about six weeks of formal instruction for the rest of the school year, which for most students ends on June 9.

San Diego Unified School Board Vice President Richard Barrera acknowledged that students will be losing several weeks of official instruction but said that the current circumstances make it impossible to replicate a normal education.

"Of course parents have every right to be concerned and students have every right to be concerned," Barrera said. "What we're doing is we're providing the best possible educational program that we can to students under the circumstances that we're in. So we need to be crystal clear that this is not in any way even close to what they would get if the schools were open."

The district's plan is to launch a "revised online learning system" that will allow for interaction with professional educators, San Diego Unified Superintendent Cindy Marten said in a letter to families Tuesday.

The plan assumes students and staff will not return to physical school sites by April 6, which was the original re-open date San Diego Unified set.

On April 6, after the district's spring break ends, there will be an online learning "soft launch" where teachers will start receiving training on how to transition to online instruction, according to the district's plan.

Teachers also will start working with students remotely and identifying students "who are unable to take part."

During the soft launch, district officials also plan to distribute about 40,000 district-owned laptops and corresponding WiFi hotspots to students who need them, Barrera said.

Academic work will not be graded for credit during the soft launch, but it will count toward students' academic progress in their courses.

Grading and formal instruction will begin three weeks later, on April 27, for most students.

For the 10 percent of students who attend schools that are on a year-long calendar, full online instruction and grading will begin on May 11. The spring break for year-long students lasts until April 27.

Because of the shortened timeline, teachers will have to cut down on the content they otherwise would have taught and prioritize content that is “absolutely essential,” Barrera said.

Students should not be expected to do a full school day’s worth of work online every weekday either, Barrera said, because that much screen time wouldn’t be healthy or realistic for students.

The district has not been requiring teachers to give any mandatory schoolwork for credit or assignments since it closed all schools starting last Monday.

The district and individual teachers have been encouraging students to use optional enrichment resources, including daily lesson plans the district has published online for each grade level and daily educational TV programming offered through a partnership with KPBS.

District officials say it will be difficult to switch entirely to distance learning, partly because it will require preparing teachers who have been trained to provide classroom-only instruction for their whole careers.

“How do you flip the switch and turn it into distance learning overnight? That’s a tremendous challenge that we are up for,” Marten said.

When it comes to grading, completing courses and fulfilling graduation requirements, Marten said she expects the rules will need to be re-shaped, because these school closures are unprecedented, and essentially all of the country’s schools are in the same boat in terms of being unable to complete the school year normally.

“Let’s not anybody fool themselves into thinking this is a traditional school day or a traditional school year. What’s happening right now is nothing close to traditional,” she said. “The context has changed so much.”

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