

Several education bills to deal with effects of COVID-19

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Legislators are awaiting the governor's signature on several education-related bills to deal with the impact of shutdowns due to COVID-19.

On Friday, Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law a bill that will ensure those students who receive free and reduced meals have access to food while school is closed, but he has yet to act on a bill that would permit the use of virtual instruction to meet a district's 180-day requirement.

While schools are out, districts are providing meals for students in a variety of methods. The new meal law requires school districts to provide meals to students enrolled in the free or reduced meal program during COVID-19 school closings and provides guidance as to how schools may distribute meals or meal vouchers.

In addition, Murphy signed a bill to allow public bodies to conduct meetings, and provide notice, by electronic means during periods of emergency, paving the ways for school boards to meet electronically.

The virtual instruction bill was passed by both houses of the state Legislature last week.

Currently, under guidance by the Department of Education, school districts across the state have moved to remote instruction for at least the next two weeks, many until after spring break, and some indefinitely, as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise.

Health experts and state officials have recommended and put into place guidelines for residents to stay in their homes to control the spread.

Another bill related to the school shutdown awaiting the governor's signature is to address the obstacles faced by students without computers or internet capabilities and bridge the digital divide in student access to technology by providing funding for laptops, tablets, hot spot devices and other technology for students to use in both a school setting or at home.