OPEN LETTER FROM STATE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT RICHARD WOODS TO
SCHOOL DISTRICTS, PARENTS, STUDENTS & TEACHERS:
We must choose compassion over compliance

It has been one month since Georgia’s school buildings closed and transitioned to
distance learning. In that month, Georgia’s teachers, educational leaders, parents, and
students have done a remarkable job adapting to this “new normal” and continuing to
learn in circumstances none of us could have imagined when the school year began.

We have seen public education rise up and make the best of a bad situation. Georgia’s
teachers have gone far above and beyond the call of duty to serve their students –
displaying the creativity, resilience, and commitment to students that define our
profession. I know our teachers, so I am not surprised – but I could not be more proud
or impressed.

At the same time, we know distance learning comes with challenges – for teachers,
students, and parents. Even students who are in the ideal situation for e-learning are
coping with a crisis. They may have parents or grandparents who are affected by
COVID-19 or going to work in a medical setting each day. They may themselves have
pre-existing conditions that place them at higher risk for complications from the virus.
Their parents may be out of work, or working full-time while attempting to navigate the
new learning landscape.

Other students may have no internet access, no digital devices, or may be sharing a
single device among multiple children. They may have little food to eat. Some high-
school students are picking up extra hours at work. Other children, heartbreakingly, are
in abusive home environments and have lost the refuge of the traditional school day.

And our teachers are working to serve students while taking care of their own children
or other responsibilities at home.

Those who have said the model being implemented here is not traditional distance
learning or homeschooling but “crisis learning” are exactly right.
My message to school districts – which I shared directly with district superintendents earlier this week – is that our focus during this time should be on **compassion over compliance**.

To be clear, we must continue to be vigilant in support of our students. But our focus during this time should not be on test scores, accountability or percentiles. Our marker for success should be that our children got through this time healthy, safe, and nurtured. It is not a time to be rigid or inflexible – it is a time to extend grace to each other.

I would encourage parents to extend that same grace to their child’s teachers and school district.

I know there is nothing simple about supporting your child’s education during this time. If you are concerned about the assignments your child is receiving or their ability to manage the workload, reach out to their teacher or principal and let them know. Keep the lines of communication open, and remember this is brand-new for teachers as well.

I have received some questions about why the school year has not been called off altogether, rather than continued through distance learning. School districts do have the flexibility to select an earlier end date if they choose, and I fully support those who are making that decision. Let me share from the heart of an educator why an immediate, statewide end to the school year (rather than simply the closure of school buildings) was not considered.

First, I believe we owe it to our students to keep extending opportunities for them to learn and grow. While it will take continued communication, patience, and creativity I believe this can be done without placing an undue burden on parents or students.

Second, for many students, the support and care of their teachers is a lifeline. For many of us, it was unthinkable to cut off access for those students completely in the midst of a global crisis.

For all of us, it is tempting to look around to other districts and schools to compare what is going on to your reality. No two schools or districts are alike. The capabilities and communities vary. Everyone is doing their best to make this situation work.

At the Department of Education, we have focused on providing flexibility from state and federal mandates so school districts have the freedom to focus on learning, growth, and student safety. Our guidance to them has been that no student should be penalized, or held back in their expected progression, due to circumstances over which they have no control (i.e. the COVID-19 school closures).

One month into distance learning, I am proud of the creativity, flexibility, and commitment Georgia’s educators have displayed. I am proud of Georgia’s parents, who have advocated for their children and taken on a role they never thought they’d have.
And I am proud of Georgia’s students – especially our graduating seniors – who have demonstrated great resilience and integrity.

This challenge is not over. There are more difficulties ahead. But if we keep the focus on compassion over compliance and extend grace to each other – grace from principals to teachers, from teachers to students, from parents to teachers – we will get through this time together and be stronger for it.

Sincerely,

Richard Woods
State School Superintendent

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