Texas Gov. Greg Abbott suspends STAAR testing requirements over coronavirus

Almost all school districts in the Greater Houston area will extend their campus closures until at least April 10 after originally saying they would remain closed for one to two weeks.

The announcements from individual districts Monday came hours after Gov. Greg Abbott waived the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, testing requirements for the 2019-2020 school year, and after the U.S. Centers for Disease control recommended limiting gatherings to fewer than 10 people.

In a statement on his office website, the governor also said he is calling on the U.S. Department of Education to waive federal testing requirements for this school year.
Abbott said he is working with the Texas Education Agency to ensure students still receive instruction and that students with disabilities have the same access to education as their peers.

Locally, all superintendents in the TEA’s Region IV, which encompasses most of greater Houston, said they decided to keep schools closed until after Easter and that they would evaluate whether to reopen them on April 6.

Elizabeth Celania-Fagen, superintendent of Humble ISD, said the extended closures will allow the state to test more people and, with that data, better know how the virus is spreading and what actions need to be taken.

“It’s definitely evolving every day, but health experts have been pretty clear that four weeks is far more helpful than two,” Fagen said. “We need more time to collect more data, and we need to give our healthcare systems more time.”

With schools across the state in limbo, state officials canceled Texas’ high stakes standardized testing, which was slated to begin in April. Traditionally, students in grades 5, 8 and 12 must pass certain state-issued exams to advance to the next grade level or graduate, though some still can move on if given approval by a district committee.

However, Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath said in a conference call with education and government officials on Monday that the state delegate decisions around grade level promotion and graduation requirements to each district, the Houston Chronicle has learned.

Morath said he and educators across the state remain concerned that school closures related to COVID-19 will impact students’ academic growth. To that end, Morath said the TEA will make available “free tools to diagnose student learning.”

TEA officials said they are looking for ways that schools could administer the STAAR test if any local district leaders decide they want students to take it. That decision would be up to individual districts.