

# NM prepares to allow some students back on campus

---

BY DAN BOYD AND DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU

Published: Thursday, August 27th, 2020 at 2:35pm

Updated: Friday, August 28th, 2020 at 9:20am



Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham wears a Smokey Bear mask during an update on the COVID-19 outbreak in New Mexico on Thursday. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

*Copyright © 2020 Albuquerque Journal*

**SANTA FE** – With coronavirus infection rates declining, New Mexico plans to allow some of its youngest students back on campus next month for in-person learning – but only if the schools and their home counties meet a series of strict requirements.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham also said Thursday the state will loosen its ban on large public gatherings – up from no more than five people to a 10-person limit – and permit some museums to reopen at partial capacity.

Those changes are part of a new public health order that will take effect Saturday and run through Sept. 18, though it could be revised again before that date.

“Introducing this amount of risk isn’t something I’d do unless I thought it was safe and it was something we could do,” Lujan Grisham said during a news conference broadcast online from the Roundhouse.

The easing of restrictions comes amid a recent drop in new COVID-19 infections, the test positivity rate and hospitalizations statewide.

Specifically, the state’s seven-day rolling average of new cases per day fell to 139 on Thursday – down from 296 a month earlier, according to a Journal analysis.

However, Lujan Grisham reported nine more coronavirus deaths on Thursday, the most in a day since Aug. 5. The new fatalities pushed the statewide death toll to 764 residents since March.

In addition, the governor and top state health official cautioned New Mexicans that a previous easing of business restrictions in June preceded a surge of new coronavirus cases.

“We tried this before; it didn’t work so well,” said Human Services Secretary David Scrase, the top physician in Lujan Grisham’s Cabinet. “We have to change that.”

Scrase urged state residents to be careful – by staying home when they can and wearing face masks in public settings – even as the state relaxes some restrictions.

The Lujan Grisham administration has faced pressure from Republican officials and some business owners to loosen business restrictions with the state’s unemployment rate having increased to 12.7% in July.

But state GOP chairman Steve Pearce on Thursday blasted the announced changes as arbitrary, even though court challenges to Lujan Grisham’s use of emergency powers have been unsuccessful.

“There’s never been a sound strategy, and the governor has failed to steadily guide New Mexico through these difficult times,” Pearce said.

### **Remote learning**

New Mexico’s public schools have started the school year under a remote learning model with students tuning in to classes from their homes or other locations.

But in-person classes could resume Sept. 8 – the day after Labor Day – if districts submit re-entry plans that are approved by the state Public Education Department.

To date, 38 of the state's 89 school districts have had their plans approved, PED Secretary Ryan Stewart said.

He acknowledged shortcomings of teaching students remotely, saying there's "no substitute" for in-person learning, but said the state will prioritize safety during the pandemic.

"We have to keep the safety of every single student and every single staff member at the forefront," Stewart said.

For that reason, New Mexico schools will only be allowed to reopen under a "hybrid" learning model that includes a mix of in-person and online learning if they are located in counties with low rates of new coronavirus cases, among other standards.

While most of the state already meets the reopening requirements, school districts in at least six counties would be barred from reopening schools – Chaves, Eddy, Lea, Roosevelt, Hidalgo and Quay.

In addition, districts will not be required to reopen schools if they vote not to do so.

Twenty-four school districts statewide – including Albuquerque and Santa Fe – have announced they do not plan to immediately resume in-person teaching after Labor Day even if given the green light by the state.

For those school districts that do reopen, New Mexico will at first allow only elementary school students to return, Lujan Grisham said, because they are the most in need of in-person instruction. Older students may return to campus later.

Jeff Gephart, superintendent of Reserve Independent Schools in Catron County, said Thursday he's glad the state is approaching school reopening county by county.

"We have actually been asking for some flexibility so that if other areas are not doing well we can still be given that flexibility," Gephart said.

He added the district has had some younger kids on campus in small groups but he's excited to bring more elementary students back, describing remote learning as difficult for younger students.

### **Museums, restaurants**

Other changes set to take effect Saturday will affect museums, restaurants and churches around New Mexico.

While museums or art collectives with interactive displays must remain closed, traditional museums with static displays may operate at 25% capacity.

Shelle Sanchez, director of Albuquerque's Cultural Services Department, said visitors can expect some changes.

"It's going to be different," Sanchez said of the experience. "If visitors have gone to the BioPark Zoo or Botanic Garden, we're going to rely on timed ticketing in the same way. It makes it easier to monitor the visitors that are there. We've all wanted to reopen and we've worked on reopening plans since May."

Sanchez said it will take the staff about two or three weeks to get everything in motion and a reopen date will be set soon.

The Albuquerque Museum will be able to open, as will the Anderson Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum.

But Sanchez said Explora, a popular science center for families, won't reopen due to it being a high-touch museum. The Meow Wolf arts collective, a big tourist draw in Santa Fe, will remain closed for the same reason.

Other changes to business restrictions in the new public health order include allowing restaurants, breweries and other types of eateries to resume indoor dining operations at 25% of maximum capacity. They had been operating at a 50% limit before being ordered closed in mid-July amid a surge in coronavirus cases statewide.

In addition, the new order will also up the limit on how many people can attend in-person church services – and services at other houses of worship – from 25% to 40% of capacity.

Lujan Grisham, who described the state's overall coronavirus trajectory as "great," urged New Mexicans to remain vigilant.

She also said she was considering making changes to a separate travel order that requires most people who arrive in New Mexico to self-quarantine for 14 days, perhaps by as soon as next week.