Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Thursday asked all elementary, junior high and high schools nationwide to close from Monday through the students’ spring break, which typically ends in early April.

“Efforts have been made to prevent the spread of infection among children in each region, and these one or two weeks will be an extremely critical period,” Abe told a meeting of key Cabinet ministers on the coronavirus outbreak crisis.

“The government attaches the top priority to the health and safety of children, among others,” he said.

Later Thursday, the health and welfare ministry said Abe’s request does not apply to day care centers for children and after-school facilities for elementary school students.

Abe’s surprise announcement came as the number of confirmed COVID-19 virus patients kept surging, exceeding 200 across Japan as of Thursday evening, excluding the more than 700 infected patients related to the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship.

Most of the 1,600 elementary and junior high schools in Hokkaido decided to close for a week the same day in an effort to slow the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

The action came a day after the Hokkaido education board urged local authorities to temporarily close all public and private elementary and junior high schools in an effort to contain the spread of the virus as over 50 infections have been confirmed in the prefecture, including some students.

“We will make our best efforts to prevent further spread of infection to protect the lives and health of the people in Hokkaido,” Gov. Naomichi Suzuki said during a prefectural assembly session.

Ochanomizu University in Tokyo had already said it will close affiliated schools from Friday for about a month until early April, including a spring break. Prince Hisahito, the 13-year-old nephew of Emperor Naruhito, attends the junior high school affiliated with the university. “I believe it is an unprecedented closure for such an extended period of time,” a school official said.

The Kanagawa government decided to exclude parents and guardians from attending graduation and entrance ceremonies at junior and senior high schools run by the prefecture as a precautionary measure.

Hokkaido’s capital Sapporo, which has about 300 elementary and junior high schools, will close from Friday through March 6.
“We wanted to secure enough time for working parents to arrange their schedules with their employers before starting the break,” said Masahide Hasegawa, chief of Sapporo’s education board, explaining the one-day delay in the closure compared with other schools in Hokkaido.

Machiko Inari, a 40-year-old resident of Hakodate, will take a week off to take care of her daughter, in fifth grade, and her son in kindergarten. “Although it will affect my work and coworkers, it’s better if it reduces the risk of infection for children as little is still known about the disease,” she said.

According to the Hokkaido education board, a health survey targeting all affected teachers will be conducted during the shutdown, while a decision to decontaminate school facilities will be determined by each municipality.

On March 5, a special class on infectious diseases will be held at all elementary and junior high schools in Hokkaido, and schools are expected to prepare for it during the closure.

High schools weren’t a part of the prefecture’s recommendation to close, and entrance exams for public high schools will be held on March 4 as scheduled.

The temporary closure is in line with central government guidelines that asked municipalities to consider calling off classes at all schools and closing down day care centers in areas where multiple virus cases are confirmed. In Tomakomai, where the infection of a female high school student has been confirmed, all elementary and junior high schools decided to shut down until March 8, longer than the request made by the prefectural education board.

In Ebetsu, where a junior high school teacher has tested positive for the virus, schools will be closed until March 6.

A series of infections at Hokkaido schools also include two brothers at an elementary school in Nakafurano and a school bus driver in Aibetsu.

(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/liveblogs/news/coronavirus-outbreak-updates/)