

A Blueprint for Back to School

John P. Bailey and Frederick M. Hess

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Families and communities need schools to be ready to reopen as soon as public health officials signal that it is safe. After all, the nation has recently been reminded just how vital schools really are. Schools connect students with peers and mentors, channel youthful energy into productive pursuits, teach essential academic skills and knowledge, and give overwhelmed parents room to breathe and work. Reopening schools in a manner that is safe and responsive to the needs of families and communities will involve novel challenges. Leaders must begin planning immediately.

State policymakers, school leaders, and community leaders should develop plans based on the following assumptions.

- Schools will remain closed for the rest of the 2019–20 academic year but will reopen in the 2020–21 academic year (albeit with the potential of localized rolling closures for 14–28 days triggered by additional waves of infections).
- Reopened schools will need modifications based on guidance from national and state health officials, which could include physical distancing, temperature screenings, and frequent disinfecting of classrooms.
- Accommodations will be needed for the one in five teachers, one in four school principals, and other school staff who are over age 55 (and thus in a high-risk COVID-19 category), as well as for those at risk due to other health factors.
- A vaccine might not be available for 18 months or more, meaning that plans should take into account both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years.

In planning for the adjustments and contingencies implied by these assumptions, there are four principles to guide decisions and preparations as state, local, and federal officials work to reopen America’s schools.

- While governors have the authority to close and open schools, these decisions are best made by consulting with school leaders, health officials, and community leaders.
- Schools have a responsibility to meet the continued needs of all students, including the unique needs of students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners.
- Schools have a responsibility to serve all students, even during times of disruption when remote learning requires students to connect from home to online instruction and resources.
- Given that school systems cannot reasonably have been expected to plan for the current situation, state and federal officials must help provide the resources schools need to help weather the crisis.

We hope readers will refer to the full blueprint for the particulars, but as communities and public officials start to think about the problems ahead, states, districts, and schools should consider at least six different buckets of work.

- **General Considerations.** There are at least four broad considerations when planning for reopening: coordination, communication, regulatory flexibility, and privacy protections. Schools will have to coordinate closely with state and local health officials to develop a unified public health strategy. They will need to communicate with stakeholders so that students, families, educators, and community members are clear on expectations for academics and public health. They will need flexibility as they adapt to unprecedented challenges. And we will need to review privacy policies to ensure that schools can engage with students and families in new ways with an eye to both remote learning and community health.

- **School Operations.** Schools will have to revamp their day-to-day operations to adhere to public health guidance. This includes at least three areas of operations: public health accommodations, school meals, and transportation. When it comes to public health accommodations, schools will have to examine every aspect of the school day—from classroom spaces to class schedules—and adjust to address new public health guidance. Leaders will need to address gaps in meal service and distribution plans. As for transportation, schools will need to devise plans that conform with physical distancing protocols. All this will have obvious implications for staffing and costs and is a budget line that Washington should help address.
- **Whole Child Supports.** Schools need to consider students' social and emotional (SEL) needs. Students are experiencing COVID-19 differently. Many are going through significant trauma because of school closures, potentially losing friends and family members and experiencing insecurity created from parents losing jobs. SEL and trauma supports will be crucial not only during this period of remote learning but also in the next academic years. It is also important, however, to avoid stereotypes or stigmas and assess students as individuals with targeted support accordingly.
- **School Personnel.** Many educators may be vulnerable to COVID-19, raising questions about how to protect them, whether they will be able to work in schools next year, and how to respond to any resultant personnel shortages. Meanwhile, districts and teachers unions should work together to revisit aspects of their labor agreements to help schools adapt to social distancing and to ensure that vulnerable teachers are able to work in ways that are safe and productive. And as school budgets, responsibilities, and models evolve, schools and districts must be prepared to evaluate their staffing needs.
- **Academics.** Disrupting the school year has created broad academic challenges for students, particularly those most vulnerable before the crisis occurred. Schools will need to differentiate instructional strategies to meet students where they are. This means addressing schedules and instructional time, diagnostics, curriculum, and accountability. Schools should prepare for possible intermittent closures next year and have a continuity of learning plan in place. And states will need to consider potential assessment challenges, including the implications for traditional accountability measures.
- **Distance Learning.** Technology is never a substitute for an engaged classroom teacher, but it can support instruction—and remote learning can be a lot better than nothing at all. The sudden shift to remote learning in the spring revealed the stark challenges students faced if they were unable to connect to the online content or video conferences with their teachers. The coming months provide an opportunity to assess what worked and did not work with remote learning, address home connectivity gaps, and provide teachers the training they need to succeed next year.

Adapting to the challenges of COVID-19 gives America's schools the opportunity to provide what is uniquely possible in the schoolhouse while seeking new ways to fully use technology and community partnerships. We understand the enormity of these burdens. This is a moment when all of us—educators, families, and communities—must find ways to ensure that children get back the schools and connections so important to their young lives. When schools get the green light to go, they must be ready. That work starts now.