

Promising Practices Emerge from Expert Peer Review of District Reopening Plans

EXPERT PEER PANEL

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As school districts across the nation braced themselves for the immensely complex task of preparing reopening and recovery plans amid a global pandemic, the Collaborative for Student Success and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) convened experts in emergency planning, health and safety, parent and family advocacy, special education, and school district and state leadership to review school districts' plans to educate students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over 100 districts were considered and twenty were selected for panelist review based on their level of comprehension, geographic representation, and variation in size. Using a rubric designed by the Collaborative and CRPE to support district officials, panelists reviewed both reopening plans as well as all online communications and resources.

Below, we have collected the practices that the review panel identified as particularly strong and replicable. We hope that by highlighting promising practices early in the new school year, other district and state leaders may have an opportunity to identify and reproduce those that best serve their needs and help foster an environment where teachers and students can succeed.

However, planning is different than execution. We will be eager to see how districts implement these promising practices. Our intent is not to endorse entire plans, but to pull out specific approaches within plans that are promising and exciting. In addition to promising practices, we intend to release the full peer analysis in the coming months.

SUPPORT FOR STAFF, STUDENTS, AND PARENTS

INTENTIONAL supports that demonstrate an understanding of the critical role that community partners will continue to play throughout recovery, the impact the pandemic has on the mental health of students and adults, and how to meaningfully engage parents as partners.

Kansas City Public Schools, Missouri

School and district leaders are engaging with a number of organizations to address students' current and anticipated needs. The [Justice in Schools program](#) is a partnership between the school district, legal resources (Legal Aid for Western Missouri), and public health resources (Kansas City Public Health) to ensure that students and families facing crises like eviction, foreclosure, and job loss have a means of mitigating adverse effects on student performance. The district is also [partnering](#) with the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City to provide high quality school-age childcare for free to KCPS families and staff.

“The most valuable feature of this KCPS approach is the explicit recognition at the outset that many students affected in adverse ways by both the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic downturn will inevitably affect success for the entire district in educating the next generation. Those failures, if allowed to intensify, will be very hard to reverse in coming years.”

~James Schwab

Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida

Miami-Dade's plan prioritizes a variety of supports to help parents navigate the start of the school year. The plan incorporated survey and social media feedback from over 250,000 families, a [Week of Welcome](#) that featured five days of mandatory and optional videos for families, and a [Parent Academy](#) providing support in eight areas. Parent resources focused on topics relevant to resuming learning, such as navigating student and parent portals, mental and social-emotional wellness resources, and organization and study skills. In addition, robust communications were developed to disseminate resources to parents and families, including the use of a Distance Learning Helpdesk, a K-12 Help Desk, and a Mental Health Hotline.

“Distance learning in the middle of a pandemic means that parents and families are as important as ever. High quality learning cannot happen without the buy-in, support, and technical skill of families. This is what makes Miami-Dade's approach so outstanding: families will know how to navigate distance learning.”

~Matt Shaver

“Using videos to convey this information captures many of the nuances and subtleties of mental health challenges in ways that written language alone could never do. That is what makes this page special: It reaches people in the simplest, most direct, most personal way possible from a digital platform. In the process, it creates a resource that is available to every other school district in the nation that may choose to link to it, or replicate this effective outreach in its own way.”

~James Schwab

Jeffco Public Schools, Colorado

JeffCo Public Schools are providing resources that clearly demonstrate a recognition of the mental health pressures on both students and faculty. This [web page](#) of COVID-19 Mental Health Supports has a robust array of resources, including videos discussing managing anxiety around COVID-19. Videos introduce and cover a wide array of topics via interviews with district leaders talking to experts across a variety of mental health content areas.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM AND DATA USE

Districts showed creativity in how they will use technology for learning, rethink school schedules, and track essential data to support students' individual needs and ensure learning continues during the pandemic. Student assessment strategies measure not only where students are academically but also how the distance learning plan is working.

San Antonio Independent School District, Texas

San Antonio created and launched a [student interaction tracker app](#) over the summer that logs every interaction a teacher or support staff has with a student, as well as whether students submit assignments and participate in classes. This allows all of the teachers and staff who work with an individual student to stay up to speed on their engagement and progress, and whether they need additional support or specific help. Additionally, the district is using this to create a tentative fall plan for each student, using data on student engagement from the app and performance from fall MAP testing.

“This small detail is a great example of the empathy and creativity that SAISD has brought to the entire re-opening process. They've done a great job of not only soliciting community input but translating it into smart policies and practices that are much more likely to both be more successful and generate ongoing community support. All districts are going to need that sort of political capital in the months ahead.”

~Steven Hodas

Each student's plan is also informed by the [Branching Minds](#) platform that helps identify both the root challenges each student is facing and the most appropriate evidenced-based intervention for the [student](#). Each student's learning plan will be further informed by student performance throughout the school year, as well as the student's MAP results at the start of the year.

San Antonio schools are allowing parents to tour [model classrooms](#) in order to show what socially distanced classrooms will look like throughout the school year. This will allow a parent to make an informed decision about any academic tradeoffs or health risks.

Tulsa Public Schools, Oklahoma

Tulsa has outlined specific practices that the district intends to use to target distinct populations of students. High school seniors are a key consideration in Tulsa's plan, which offers college and career information and advising for students who are preparing to graduate and pursue post-secondary goals. The district is also innovating on its annual calendar, offering six "intersessions" where prioritized groups of students, including but not limited to students with special needs, can receive in-person interventions.

"Tulsa's district website provides a host of resources to high school students making sure they have access to what they need to apply and be college ready during these difficult times. It's important that students feel supported and reassured that what they've worked so hard for is still obtainable and there's a plan in place to get them across the finish line."

—Lisa Babbitt

"Tests that verify what students have and have not learned are more important now than ever before as families and educators across the country are worried their kids have fallen behind. Prince George's plan to measure student learning needs consistently across the district was unique among the plans we reviewed and will support educators in tailoring instruction for each student this school year."

—Rebecca Shah

Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland

PG County's [plan](#) clearly describes its assessment program and how it intends to provide student performance data to assist staff in identifying student learning needs for the upcoming school year, whether that continues as distance learning or transitions to in-person instruction. Parents, students, and staff are given a clear set of expectations and priorities for how students will be assessed. Beginning on page 82, the district plans on administering assessments on an online platform and intends to provide all students with the required technology. To leverage multiple opportunities to collect student assessment data, the district intends to focus on:

- Administering bridging diagnostic assessments to all students in all major content areas to support student placement and to identify gaps in understanding due to prolonged school closure.
- Administering benchmark assessments to all students at the end of each quarter's instruction in reading/English/language arts and mathematics to provide instructional feedback and progress monitoring on standards-based instruction.
- Administering a universal screening diagnostic assessment to all kindergarten, first, and second grade students to identify any students at risk in reading and language skills and determine the best interventions to provide for support and remediation.

The district also specifically details how it will evaluate the effectiveness of its distance learning program on page 83. The evaluation will assess the processes and procedures as well as the associated outcomes. The district will use a variety of data sources including student grades, their social and emotional learning needs, and survey responses.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESOURCE TRANSPARENCY

Districts must earn parent and community TRUST. That starts with being clear and explicit about how funding is used, how staff are being deployed, and what steps are being taken to create a more equitable system.

“Milwaukee Public Schools used a collaborative approach to not only create a very detailed and thoughtful reopening plan, but also a transparent and detailed budget. It is clear that much thought was put into anticipated needs during the coming school year in a variety of categories. Many districts have not produced such a transparent budget this early, so Milwaukee should be recognized for their timeliness and attention to detail.”

—Amanda McAdams

Milwaukee Public Schools, Wisconsin

Milwaukee’s plan often features meticulous attention to detail regarding roles and responsibilities. Each section of the plan begins with what the district will do and what students, families, and staff will notice. The district’s three learning models — virtual, blended, and in-person — are carefully compared side-by-side in each section of the plan. The district also provides a comprehensive and detailed budgetary analysis of cost projections across 10 distinct categories (i.e. health and safety, facilities, transportation, and nutrition).

In a category like “nutrition” a parent or stakeholder can clearly see the cost implications based on the learning model in effect. For example, the plan considers implications of providing lunches to students in classrooms instead of a cafeteria, enforcing social distancing on buses, and anticipating higher cleaning costs to allow for school disinfectant procedures.

Houston Independent School District, Texas

HISD’s strategy for communication centers on ensuring that parents receive the information they need, regardless of the medium each parent tends to use. The plan commits to employing social media, news media, parent guides (below), blog posts, in-person or virtual meetings, and other avenues to ensure that parents are informed. A look through the district’s Twitter account reveals not only regular, timely updates, but also in-the-moment troubleshooting — including pictures — and answers to questions the district is getting on the fly as distance education is taking place. The district has released its reopening parent guide in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and (in abbreviated form) Arabic.

“Houston ISD is going above and beyond to reach parents. They are not asking parents to come to them. They are doing their best to get to the parents however they can.”

—Hakeem Bey

“Baltimore City provided a fantastic look into how grant funding — including CARES Act dollars — has been allocated as part of the district’s spending plan and reopening strategy. At a time when states and districts have been understandably asking for more federal assistance, they would do well to follow Baltimore City’s lead in maximizing transparency and therefore providing confidence that existing dollars have been well utilized.”

—Dale Chu

Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland

Baltimore City grounds its plan in a clear set of robust principles, starting on page 8, and weaves them throughout. The district has set instructional expectations and made clear it seeks learning acceleration for all students, not remediation. The district also references its school board’s robust equity policy, starting on page 108, throughout the plan. Baltimore City was one of few examples of a strong focus on equity among district plans reviewed. The district also dedicates several pages of its plan to budget, starting on page 13, and specifically calls out how it is using its share of Maryland’s CARES Act funds.

CONNECTIVITY AND TECHNOLOGY

EFFECTIVE virtual environments take more than just a device or broadband access – these plans take into consideration the sweat equity and support it takes to have smooth learning experiences.

Guilford County Schools, North Carolina

District officials in Guilford County have taken several measures to bridge the digital divide for students who lack reliable access. The district has purchased devices for nearly every student, teacher and instructional staff member. They will also be deploying 125 “smart buses” in high-need communities to help bridge the digital divide. In addition to investing in 3,500 self-owned hotspots, they have secured partnerships with the City of High Point to jointly identify more locations with city-owned and managed Wi-Fi, including recreation-centers and other buildings with public-facing internet access. In addition, the district offers free-of-cost learning centers in targeted areas of the county for students to participate in remote learning. These learning centers operate from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Friday and are housed in a wing or area of the school that’s separate from teacher and staff work areas.

“Guilford has really leaned into meeting families where they are, literally and figuratively. The partnerships with the local housing authority and transportation agency will make it easier for students, especially those in precarity or who may also be juggling work and childcare responsibilities on behalf of their families, to get back on track academically.”

–Steven Hodas

Prince George’s County Public Schools, Maryland

Leaders in PG County set up parent support centers, described on page 12 of its plan summary, open two days per week and in multiple locations, for parents to visit and get answers to questions about online learning, technology, and instructional materials, with parent engagement assistants offering in-person and virtual support. The district supplemented this resource with a distance learning hotline for parents to use for guidance and troubleshooting.

As districts transition from merely preparing to reopen schools to ensuring sustained learning throughout the school year, we are hopeful that elevating promising, creative, and innovative solutions to common challenges will illuminate potential paths forward for others. In coming months, the Collaborative for Student Success and CRPE will present the full expert panel analysis and progress updates, as it’s anticipated that district and school leaders will engage in consistent reflection, modification, and improvement of their reopening and recovery plans throughout the year.

About the Expert Panelists:

The panel of peer review experts was convened by the Collaborative for Student Success and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. For more information on the peer reviewers, visit the project site at www.crpe.org/current-research/collaborative-and-crpe.*

About the Collaborative for Student Success:

The Collaborative for Student Success is a non-profit advocacy organization that works to defend high standards, high-quality assessments, and strong systems of accountability to ensure that all kids are prepared for college or career. Through capacity-building efforts with in-state organizations and collaboration with national partners, we promote fact-based public discourse and fight to advance policies that promote best practices and ensure equitable outcomes for all students. Learn more at www.forstudentsuccess.org

About CRPE:

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is one of the nation’s leading sources for transformative, evidence-based ideas to improve education. To ensure all students are prepared for a rapidly changing future, we put forward rigorous research and policy analysis to help educators, policymakers, civic and community leaders, parents, and students themselves reimagine education systems and structures. Learn more at www.crpe.org

*As panelists reviewed plans in the context of a fast-changing environment, links may change and practices profiled may evolve.