



REOPENING SCHOOLS AFTER COVID-19 CLOSURES

Considerations for States

May 2020

With school campuses shuttered due to COVID-19, the rate and level of quality of student instruction varies across the nation, states, regions and even neighborhood to neighborhood. It's now almost certain that the 2019-20 school year - as it was meant to be executed - is now over. Given this fact, the questions on many state leaders' minds are these:

1. When and how should schools reopen (once it's safe from a health perspective to do so)?
2. What could school schedule, student placement and educator staffing options "look like" when we reopen?
3. How should we provide supports to students, particularly those who are most in-need, once schools reopen?

Below are a range of options that states might consider - each of them possessing some advantages and drawbacks. States might consider adopting one or more (in some instances) to help schools best meet the needs of students. As states begin to evaluate which options are most appropriate for their unique context, they should take into account additional issues that would need to be considered, including:

- Varying direct and indirect costs of implementing different models
- Collective bargaining and educator contracts
- Professional development to support high-quality implementation
- State-level and district/school-level capacity to implement each identified model

ExcelinEd is committed to supporting states and leaders as they continue to navigate the complex decisions related to continuing instruction, reopening schools, and supporting students, educators and families. This resource will continue to be updated to reflect emerging trends in reopening approaches and public health information. If you would like to submit recommendations for additional options to be added to this document, please email your ideas to Info@ExcelinEd.org.



TIMING: WHEN & HOW

As leaders continue to assess their states' COVID-19 outbreaks and economic reopening strategies, they can consider a variety of timelines for the reopening of school campuses (once it is safe from a health perspective) in order to meet their students' and communities' needs.

Options for Initial School Reopening		
Option	Description	Comments
<i>Reopen Schools Early - State Requirement for All Schools and Students</i>	States could consider starting the 2020-2021 school year early (e.g., July) so teachers can ensure students receive the right supports and instruction to be successful in the next grade level.	This option allows for a standard, coordinated return to normalcy; however, it may shorten the preparation time districts need to reopen schools, (e.g., professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators to address instructional loss issues).
<i>District-Determined Reopening Schedule</i>	<p>Just as during normal times, many districts set their own start dates. Typically, districts open within 3-4 weeks of each other statewide.</p> <p>States could allow schools to reopen when the local district/community is ready to reopen schools. Some districts may choose to open early, open normally, open on a phased-in schedule, etc. But it would be a local determination vs. a statewide decision.</p>	<p>This option keeps reopening decisions at the local level so districts can be responsive to community needs and readiness.</p> <p>Because this option keeps reopening decisions at the local level, there may be more concerns/criticisms expressed by families targeted at the local level because they do not like the local decision made.</p> <p>States could still set minimum criteria that must be met to reopen schools and could narrow the options so that districts are just selecting between a more limited set of opening options.</p>



Options for Initial School Reopening		
Option	Description	Comments
<p><i>Phased-In Reopening (Required for Some Students)</i></p>	<p>States could consider starting the 2020-2021 school year early for “at-risk students” (e.g., those who were already considered struggling or below-grade level in the prior year as well as students who did not “check in” or participate in remote learning during the campus closures).</p> <p>Campuses could open during normal start times for all remaining students.</p>	<p>This option allows for students whom the district identifies as needing additional support to get additional instruction before the official start of the year. States could provide guidance to support districts in determining student eligibility.</p> <p>Different planning would need to occur as the remainder of the student body returns, requiring at-risk students to make an additional transition to mainstream classrooms in a relatively short (1-2 month) period of time.</p>
<p><i>Phased-In Reopening (Parent Choice for Some Students)</i></p>	<p>Similar to the required summer school option - states could consider starting the 2020-2021 school year early for any student whose family wants an earlier open date. Campuses could open during normal start times for all students.</p> <p>NOTE: Instruction during the optional early session would be in the content missed in the prior grade due to campus closures (e.g., 4th grade instruction for incoming 5th grade students).</p>	<p>This option allows students whose families believe they need additional support to get additional instruction before the official start of the year. This would require strong communications to ensure families know about the summer options.</p> <p>Different planning would need to occur as the remainder of the student body returns - so students would need to make an additional transition to other classrooms in a relatively short (1-2 month) period of time.</p> <p>This option provides some parental control over the return schedule for their child. Some families may need an earlier opening option so they can return to work.</p>



Options for Increasing Instructional Time		
Option	Description	Comments
<i>Extended School Days</i>	Regardless of the reopening model selected, states could consider planning for longer school days, especially over the next 1-2 years to help mitigate learning loss.	This model could allow more instructional time within the traditional school calendar. All normal scheduling, sports, childcare issues would need to be considered, as would funding based on student seat time.
<i>Extended School Year</i>	Regardless of the reopening model selected, states could consider extending the school year further into summer 2021 to help mitigate learning loss.	<p>This model could allow more time for instruction to combat the learning loss that has occurred due to campus closures.</p> <p>This model could allow for local flexibility in terms of when to schedule additional instructional days (adjusting school breaks, extending into the summer, etc.).</p> <p>All normal scheduling, sports, childcare issues would need to be considered, as would funding based on student seat time.</p>
<i>Year-Round Schedule</i>	Regardless of the reopening model selected, states could consider planning to operate schools year-round - even if just for a limited 1-2 year period of time.	<p>This model could allow more time for instruction, carrying over into the following summer to combat the learning loss that has occurred due to campus closures.</p> <p>All normal scheduling/sports/childcare issues previously associated with year-round scheduling would need to be considered, as would funding based on seat time.</p>



SCHEDULE: STUDENT PLACEMENT & EDUCATOR STAFFING

Regardless of the reopening timeline(s) that states adopt, states and districts have a variety of options about how to ensure both high-quality instruction/learning and student safety. Many of these options include changes to when and how students and educators are assigned to specific courses and/or classrooms. Below are some options that can be considered individually and in tandem.

Incorporating multiple modalities (in-person, blended, hybrid/asynchronous, full-time virtual) into a district or school’s offerings may require additional state/local policy changes and investments that may include (but are not limited to):

- Ensuring teachers’ contracts allow teachers to teach multiple modalities (including virtually);
- Ensuring students and educators have access to connectivity, devices, and learning management systems that support multiple modalities of instruction;
- Offering a high-quality curriculum that supports high-quality in-person, blended/hybrid, and virtual instruction;
- Providing professional learning and clear expectations for teachers on high-quality virtual instruction and assessment;
- Ensuring teacher evaluation systems are designed to effectively measure the quality of instruction and student learning regardless of modality.

Options for Placement & Staffing

Option	Description	Comments
<p><i>Hybrid Model</i> (Asynchronous Learning) - Part Distance / Part In-Person</p>	<p>States may anticipate that in-person instruction may not be feasible for all students at the same time. Under a hybrid/asynchronous model, some students learn in-person while others learn remotely.</p> <p>Some students (especially those with underlying health conditions, undergoing disease treatment, or those with family members who are at-risk) may continue to receive online instruction full-time. Other students may attend school on alternating days or using a staggered schedule, and experience both in-person and remote learning.</p>	<p>This option would both allow for flexibility in meeting a variety of needs upon reopening and still push schools and districts to move forward with continued planning/prep for another outbreak of COVID-19 and potential ongoing campus closures.</p> <p>It will require schools and districts to convert their instruction and resources to be delivered in multiple modalities.</p> <p>States should work with schools and districts to identify and provide high-quality virtual options to these vulnerable student populations. They should clearly communicate the options to parents and provide a user-friendly method for enrollment and resources for families who will be supporting these students.</p>



Options for Placement & Staffing		
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<i>Flex-Grades in Elementary School</i>	States may want to require or encourage districts to design all elementary grades as flex-grades next year. In other words, a 5th grade class is really a 4th/5th grade class with teachers starting the year intentionally with content from the last few months of 4th grade.	Regardless of the reopening schedule, states/districts may decide to reopen schools with flex-grades in the early years. The expectation would be that every grade/class intentionally starts with a review of 1-2 months of instruction in the prior grade content. This should include consideration of extending the school year/instructional time.
<i>Teacher Looping in Elementary/Middle School</i>	States may want to require or encourage districts and schools to “loop” teachers and students based on prior year class assignments. In this model, a 2019-20 3rd grade teacher and class of students would move to 4th grade together for the 2020-21 school year. This would allow the teacher to pick up from where he/she left off in terms of instruction and content. Additionally, the teacher already knows the students, so he/she would be able to pick up on trauma and other issues more quickly.	This model would require additional professional learning and planning for teachers to potentially teach new content/standards because of a new grade-level assignment. This model should contain an option for parents to request a different teacher if there was not a good fit between the teacher and student in the prior year.
<i>Staggered Attendance Schedules</i>	States could allow or require schools and districts to adopt staggered student attendance schedules (alternate days/hours) where some students attend in the morning vs. others in the afternoon, or students attend on alternate days. This model could be implemented in conjunction with the hybrid/asynchronous model.	States and districts would need to consider the impact of transportation, childcare, meals, and other essential student services based on this staggered schedule.



Options for Placement & Staffing		
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<i>Cohort-Based Schedules (Middle/High School)</i>	States could allow or require districts to minimize person-to-person contact by using cohort-based classroom assignments. In this model, a cohort of students could be scheduled to classes that are all located within the same hallway/floor. This model could also include a cohort of students remaining in the same classroom all day, with teachers (rather than students) rotating to different classes.	<p>This model may require additional professional learning on differentiating instruction.</p> <p>This model may limit the ability to schedule courses based on student proficiency and interest (accelerated/advanced coursework, elective courses), especially in high school.</p>
<i>Proficiency-Based Groupings (Reading and Math Courses)</i>	<p>States may want to allow districts to group students across multiple grade levels based upon content taught. This would allow students to be placed in different groups/grade levels depending on the content they need.</p> <p>This will likely only be able to apply to reading and math.</p>	<p>This model would require diagnostic assessments to ensure proper placement of students in different reading/math groups.</p> <p>This model would require targeted professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators to successfully implement a mastery-based learning and instructional model.</p> <p>This would require explicit communication with parents and policies to support mastery-based transcripts for rising seniors. This model could become a foundation for districts considering transition to a mastery-based education model where students move when they have mastered the material.</p>
<i>Optional Repeat of Grades and/or Courses</i>	States could allow parents to request that their child be given the opportunity to repeat the grade that was interrupted by campus closures, especially if the student did not receive sufficient supports/instruction during the campus closure.	While it is unclear how many families would choose for their child to repeat a full year of instruction, this option allows parents to make that decision for their child without the normal hurdles that may be in place for a parent-requested retention.



SUPPORT: ACADEMIC, PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Regardless of the reopening and student/educator scheduling option(s) that states adopt, they will still need ways to determine the academic, physical and mental health needs of returning students. Below are several ideas states might consider either separately or in tandem.

Options for Supporting Student Health		
Option	Description	Comments
<i>Assessment Policy for Reopening (All Options)</i>	<p>States should ensure a strong assessment process is in place in the fall to help parents, teachers, and schools. States should ensure that any assessment used in the fall is aligned with state standards and there is quick turnaround to ensure educators have the information they need to begin instruction.</p> <p>States should consider using their spring assessment in the fall to capture statewide data on learning loss and serve as a baseline to evaluate progress made in addressing learning loss.</p> <p>States should require schools to publish a report on their assessment of the academic impact of spring 2020 school closures, including how the assessment was conducted.</p>	<p>For teachers, the data will provide them an understanding of where their students are starting the year. Parents should get more options/supports depending on how their child scores. Students below grade level in reading/math could receive supplemental tutoring, Saturday options, after school support, or ESAs for other non-district provided support. This could include summer enrichment funding to continue to catch up next summer.</p>
<i>Keeping Children Safe at School</i>	<p>States and districts should consider developing baseline safety standards for school facilities related to COVID-19. These guidelines could include processes and benchmarks related to COVID testing, use and provision of PPE/supplies (e.g., face masks, hand sanitizer), temperature checks upon entering the school building, physical distancing, cleaning, changes to buildings/facilities (e.g., no-touch soap dispensers/door openers), school closure policies in the event of local outbreaks and/or student exposure, etc.</p>	<p>These baseline standards should be publicly posted and disseminated to families, including with information about how changes to these guidelines (based on state/local health conditions) will be communicated and a process for reporting safety/health concerns to school staff.</p>



Options for Supporting Student Health		
Option	Description	Comments
<i>Whole Child “Intake” Process</i>	<p>States should ensure that districts have an “intake/care” plan in place. Every child will have different social emotional, mental health, and academic needs due to the campus closures and impact of the pandemic.</p> <p>As intake/care plans are developed, each student should have a staff member assigned to monitor progress and identify additional needs/supports throughout the year.</p>	<p>Regardless of the reopening model, states/districts should have a plan in place for a full evaluation of these needs along with available supports and plans to monitor student progress.</p> <p>Specific intake processes should be able to address the unique needs of each student group, including those that are emerging as a result of the pandemic (e.g., students who are medically-vulnerable, students who do not have access to devices/internet, students who were out of contact during spring closures, students who had a family member who contracted COVID 19, etc.)</p>
<i>Distance Learning Days - Planning for Future Disruption</i>	<p>States should consider requiring schools to add distance learning days to their annual calendar to allow students and teachers to practice distance learning throughout the year. This approach could also be used to maintain learning for other school closures (snow days, hurricane days, etc.).</p> <p>States could also consider requiring each student to take (and each teacher to teach) at least one virtual course each year, ensuring consistent exposure and comfort with this type of instruction.</p>	<p>Implementing this may require states and districts to offer professional learning and set expectations for instruction during distance learning days. This should align with a statewide/district-wide distance learning plan.</p> <p>They will also need to communicate clear expectations for distance learning days with parents, including whether or not childcare (before/after) is available for working parents.</p>



Options for Supporting Student Health		
Option	Description	Comments
<p><i>Formalize Schools as Community Hubs/Service Centers</i></p>	<p>States and districts can consider turning school buildings into formal community hubs that consolidate and co-locate services to support students and families. These services could include education (K-12 and postsecondary), physical health, mental health, food/nutrition, social services, workforce development, etc. It could also allow for community use of educational and athletic facilities, art/music rooms and supplies, and other community-based programs during non-instructional hours.</p>	<p>The co-location of services could allow for a more efficient use/deployment of resources, increase family engagement, and improve services that support outcomes for students (and their families).</p> <p>Schools and districts should consider strategies to mitigate potential increased health risk to school campuses caused by increasing numbers of people entering to access various services.</p> <p>States and districts would need to consider building access and safety, hours of operation, sharing of fixed costs (building maintenance, internet), and other logistics to ensure schools continue to support high-quality instruction while providing an integrated service center to support their students' families and communities.</p>