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Moving to the Next Phase of School Reopening

Three Pivotal Questions for District Leaders

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EDUCATION RESOURCE STRATEGIES

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Introduction

Nearly half of the 907 public school districts tracked by *Education Week* opened school fully remote this year. This includes more than three-quarters of the nation's largest districts, which serve high proportions of students with the greatest learning and social-emotional needs stemming from the pandemic. Now, many district leaders are working feverishly to determine if they can transition to some in-person learning for their students as the school year goes on.

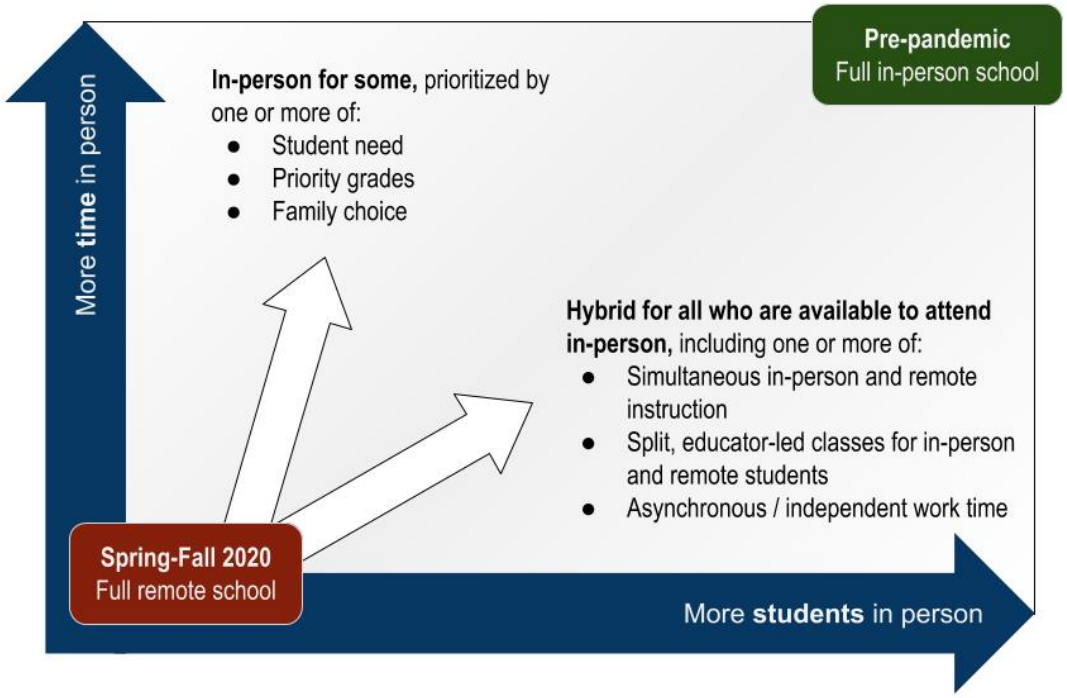
For more than six months, our team at ERS has partnered closely with eight large school districts in developing prototypes, models and tools to support district planning, grounded in guiding principles. From that work, we have now zeroed in on three challenging questions that will have an outsized impact on student and educator experiences in a transition to any in-person school:

1. What should be our next step—**hybrid or in-person**?
2. How do we meet the needs of **in-person and remote students simultaneously**?
3. How should we handle **teacher opt-outs from in-person instruction**?

Pivotal Question #1: What should be our next step – hybrid or in-person?

Many leaders in districts that started fully remote are now focusing on "moving to hybrid" as a step toward full in-person instruction. However, **remote, hybrid and in-person models do not exist on a continuum**. Rather, all these school models are distinguished by two factors: *how many students* attend school in-person and *how much time* these students spend in the school building.

Figure 1: Options for in-person or remote schooling



Before the pandemic, all students attended school in-person (top right corner). Last spring, districts moved to a fully remote model -- no students attended school in-person at all (bottom left corner).

District leaders now face a choice between maximizing the ***proportion*** of students who attend school in person at least some of the time (hybrid) and the ***amount of time*** that students who are able to go to school spend in brick-and-mortar classrooms (in-person).

Figure 2: Hybrid vs. in-person models.

	Hybrid Model	In-Person Model
Maximizes	The *proportion* of students who go to school in-person	The *amount of time* students who go to school in-person spend in school
Trade-offs	More operationally complex and more resource-intensive than in-person or remote models	With physical distancing and staff limitations, some students still need to attend remotely

Hybrid models are typically more complex and resource-intensive to implement than either in-person or remote models, creating what AFT President Randi Weingarten recently called "the hardest logistical challenge in probably most administrators' careers." Given this complexity, before moving forward, leaders must critically assess the need and demand for a hybrid model in the first place.

Accounting for Community Input

Over the summer, significant proportions of families indicated they would be interested in a hybrid model. However, as the complexity of a hybrid schedule becomes clearer, some communities are choosing an in-person-for-some model, typically focused on early elementary grades, students with low-incidence disabilities and early English language learners.

Our Guiding Principles for COVID Reentry Planning encourage leaders to create models that are simple, student-focused and aligned with the community needs. If your hybrid model does not meet those criteria, it may make sense to focus on developing an in-person model for a high-priority subset of students.

Comparing Supply and Demand

By this point, most leaders have a clear sense of the capacity of classrooms to support students with physical distancing. This capacity, when expressed as a percent of average class size, represents the "supply" of seats available for in-person instruction. "Demand" is the percent of students who want or are being prioritized for in-person learning. If demand for seats exceeds supply, a hybrid model is in order. But if supply exceeds demand, leaders can design in-person learning models for the relevant subset of students.

To illustrate this, consider two hypothetical sets of elementary schools in two districts:

In District A, classes average 24 students, while classrooms can typically accommodate 12 students with physical distancing. However, 20 students per classroom say they want to come back to school in-person. Therefore, **District A should pursue a hybrid model**, where about 10 of 20 students attend in-person on a given day.

District B's classes average 20 students, half of whom are ready to come back in-person. Classrooms can accommodate 14 students, more than the 10 to 11 students per class who are ready to return to in-person school. **An in-person model is therefore feasible for District B**.

As these examples illustrate, it is easier to move to full in-person instruction with smaller class sizes; more classroom capacity with physical distancing; and/or higher proportions of students opting for fully remote instruction.

Further Reading: K-8 In Person Transition Staffing Tool

ERS' K-8 In-Person Transition Staffing Tool helps district leaders understand what percent of students can come back in person during reopening phases, based on the staff available in each school and to what extent will students retain their teacher from the remote start of school. View this tool here.

Pivotal Question #2: How do we meet the needs of in-person and remote students simultaneously?

Whether a system is developing a hybrid or an in-person model, some students will still require fully remote instruction. The simplest schedules maintain existing class assignments but creates a new challenge - teachers must simultaneously teach students in the school building and those logging in from home. This approach also requires new technology and professional support and can be a difficult context for students to stay engaged in learning on their remote days.

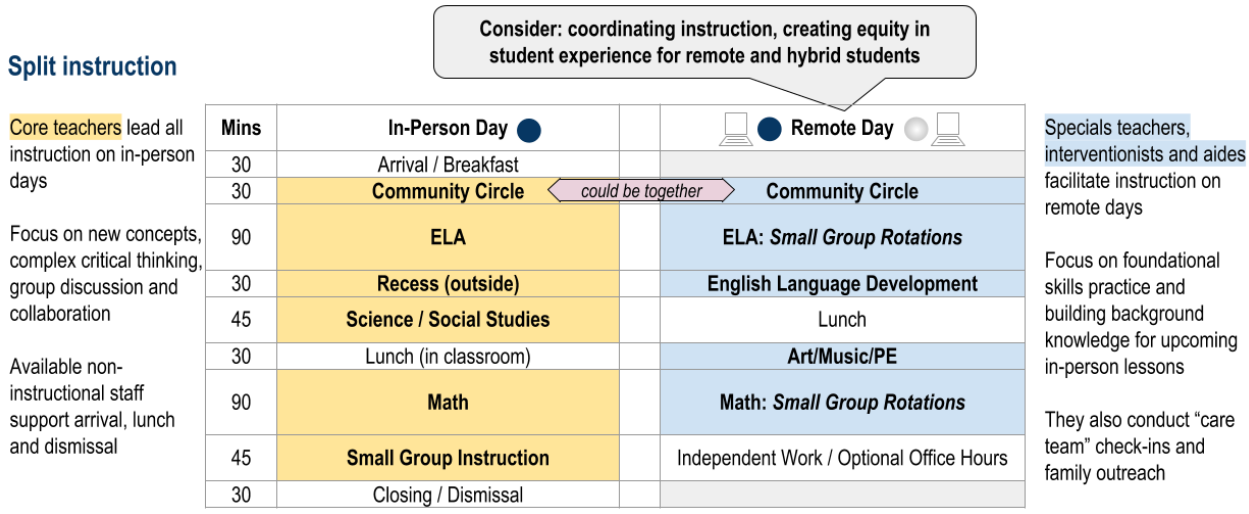
The key to a workable solution is to start with clarity about the goal of any model with in-person school. For example, a district's goal could be to provide predictable childcare for families of young children. Another goal could be to provide kids with connection to teachers and students. Those are both worthy goals but would lead to different solutions.

Simultaneous instruction led by one educator is one possible solution. Other potential solutions are detailed below.

Potential Solutions For Hybrid Models

Implement a "split schedule." In-person and remote platforms have different strengths and benefits. A split schedule, where students participate in different activities on in-person and remote days, allows educators to take advantage of these varied strengths. For example, in-person time could include Socratic seminars, science labs, complex math work and other core instruction, while remote time could include skills practice, knowledge-building, office hours with instructors and some online self-driven learning platforms. Ideally, remote days include some educator-led time to maintain student engagement and learning; a remote day schedule that is entirely asynchronous puts all the learning responsibility on the student.

Figure 3: Example of a split schedule for in-person and remote students.



Further Reading: COVID Comeback Models

ERS' COVID Comeback Models are adaptable blueprints that address scheduling and staffing at elementary, middle, and secondary school levels. Offering student groupings, sample schedules, staff roles, and system-wide implications, each model incorporate hybrid approach – where students attend school both in-person and remotely on a predictable schedule – and/or a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote approaches. View this tool here.

Target hybrid experiences to early grades, transition grades, or high-need student groups. To build more educator-led time into a hybrid model without requiring simultaneous instruction, leaders need to allocate additional resources to support in-person and remote learners. By targeting hybrid models to a smaller group of students, leaders can reduce the magnitude of this incremental investment. Students outside the target group would remain in a fully remote model.

Potential Solution for In-Person Models

Regroup students based on their preference for in-person or remote instruction. Chances are most remote classes include students who want to transition to in-person school and students who will stay fully remote. Regrouping students based on these preferences simplifies instruction and enables teachers to engage students in one modality only. Reassignment means some students and teachers will have to create new relationships mid-year; this is a smaller issue if educators are already team-teaching. If a return to full-remote is required later in the year, leaders can maintain the new class assignments.

Simultaneous Instruction Tactics

If simultaneous instruction is the district's most strategic path forward, leaders could:

Double-staff classrooms. If available, assign a second adult to help manage technology and keep remote students engaged. The second adult could be a specials teacher, interventionist, aide or other staff member, or a partner such as a City Year or other service corps member. This approach may require limiting simultaneous instruction to certain grades or subjects or necessitate other resource tradeoffs to free up staff.

Provide technology and professional development for teachers who lead simultaneous instruction. Where simultaneous instruction is the strategic choice, invest in the support teachers need to help all students succeed.

Pivotal Question #3: How should we handle teacher opt-outs from in-person instruction?

Due to health, family, or other factors, some teachers may be unable to work in the school building – but in an in-person or hybrid model, some of their students *will* attend school in-person. Below we explore potential staffing solutions that districts can employ to support both teachers and students.

Potential Staffing Solutions

Reassign the remote teacher to a new, all-remote homeroom. This approach aligns student and teacher needs: remote students work with a remote teacher, while in-person students work with an in-person teacher. The trade-off is creating new student-teacher relationships mid-year. However, if a return to full-remote is required later in the year, the new class assignments can be sustained.

Assign the fully remote teacher to support hybrid students on the student's remote days. Hybrid models without simultaneous instruction often require students to work independently on their remote days. Reassigning the fully remote teacher to provide support on these days may increase the amount of educator-led time for hybrid students on their remote days. In exchange, remote learning time may require larger group sizes.

If space permits, reassign students from the remote teacher's classroom to other classrooms. This approach aligns student and teacher needs but creates new student-teacher relationships mid-year. It may also create unbalanced teaching loads, with the remote teacher working with fewer students than each in-person teacher.

If space does not allow for class consolidation, reassign another staff member to the remote teacher's classroom. This could be a certified staff member, such as an interventionist, literacy specialist or instructional coach, or a non-certified staff joining a "family" or team-teaching model. This approach maintains continuity for students and creates leadership and collaboration opportunities for the teaching team. It also means de-prioritizing responsibilities that the re-assigned staff member had been fulfilling and could create unbalanced teaching loads, at least in the near-term.

As these options demonstrate, **schools where teachers work in teams and where roles can be defined flexibly open more possibilities**. Therefore, leaders should use all available flexibility and creativity in assigning educator roles. If roles are inflexible, it may be time to revisit or renegotiate these policies.

Conlcusion

These are just three of the many important and complex decisions district leaders are making in this unprecedented school year. All of these, and other questions, must be answered in a way that prioritizes equity and builds toward excellence for all.