

GUIDANCE FOR REOPENING SCHOOLS

Introduction

By the end of summer, children will have been effectively out of school for five months if schools open on schedule. Lack of adequate instructional time-on-task and long breaks in learning are extremely damaging to students, especially low-income students. Extended education inactivity can cause mental “atrophy.” The longer the inactivity, the more knowledge is lost and learning capability is diminished. Superintendents are already familiar with “summer slide.” Studies show children in 3rd to 5th grades lose, on average, about 20 percent of their school-year gains in reading and 27 percent of their gains in math during summer break. That likely be dramatically exacerbated this year.

One must also not underestimate the potentially catastrophic impact extended school closings are having on our poorest children. In 2018, almost 30 million students rely on schools for breakfast or lunch. Those students are also more likely to lack adequate access to online learning resources and technology often lacking the resources for effective home learning environments. For many of them schools are their safe havens and centers of social service support. Yet, out of necessity, forty-four states have directed that schools be closed for the remainder of the academic year.

The damage that has been done to students may never be reversed unless schools embrace a comprehensive strategy to put infrastructure and protocols in place to avoid further disruptions next year, and take steps to compensate for lost instructional time over the summer.

What follows are key steps to reopening schools with utmost safety in advance of vaccine/treatment.

1. **Re-engage students** and families over the summer and make preparations for a school year that may look and feel different, but delivers its core functions with maximum safety.
2. Embark upon a school or district-based COVID-19 (COVID) **public education & health campaign**
3. Create local school “**Health-Safety Teams**”
4. Develop the capacity to conduct **school-based COVID testing** and tracking
5. Schools need to have the capacity and protocols for dealing **with students and staff who have COVID symptoms.**
6. Establish and enforce strict **quarantine procedures** and facility **sanitation protocols.**
7. Adopt and enforce practical **comprehensive social distancing** strategy
8. Accelerate the push for every school to offer **quality remote learning** & support.
9. Comprehensive teacher and school **staff supports** are needed to help school personnel adjust to the “new normal” and focus on instruction and support.
10. Secure and support the **technology infrastructure.**

Extended school closures not only result in mental atrophy, but also in damage to physical and mental health. This is especially true for low-income or otherwise vulnerable students who rely on schools for nutrition and safe haven, and who need more instructional time-on-task. The summer months must be used to help repair the damage. The immediate strategy is to locate, engage all students in every system, whether district, charter or nonpublic, while preparing schools to receive them when public health officials determine schools should re-open. The long-term strategy is to customize education and supports to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Components of such a strategy include the following:

Before re-opening schools:

- Reconnect & engage those students/families who have “gone off the grid,” *i.e.*, not responding to teacher outreach, not picked up a device, not attending “class,” failing to complete assignments, etc.
- Extend food and health care services to low-income students and their families over the summer.
- Establish 24/7 “hotline” (phone, email, and/or school-based social media platform) which provides a vehicle for students and/or families in need to ask for help and for intelligence to be gathered anonymously.
- Provide students with summer instruction (summer semester) and enrichment activities and support to prevent further brain atrophy and social-emotional health deterioration blending both online and remote activities and support.
- The summer months can be a time for teacher training and preparation to support remote learning.
- The significant increase in gun sales since the onset of COVID, and a likely increase mental illness caused by the massive economic trauma and fears requires upgraded school security plans. Upgrade schools’ facilities security: entrances, cameras, student and visitor tracking mechanism, and exterior security (cameras and street closings).

Upon re-opening schools:

- Assess students to determine their level of academic proficiency and behavioral and emotional needs.
- Use the assessments to develop a more personalized instruction and support approach, and determine the appropriate interventions using the RTI model.
- Begin movement toward a more personalized Mastery approach using technology to support more individualized instruction and learning and moving towards a Mastery approach.
- Use online learning to provide re-teach opportunities while also expanding educational choices, instructional time on task and enrichment.

1. Embark upon a school or district-based COVID public education & health campaign

An active, fully transparent, communication strategy is required to: (1) provide updates on public health status; (2) effectively communicate school procedures and protocols; (3) alert schools of students or faculty exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms; and (4) promote proper health-safety behavior in the community. School and central office staff are among the most trusted people for students, parents and families. School systems can help limit the impact of COVID by influencing people, especially young people, to follow CDC recommendations both in and out of school. Critical partners in the public education campaign should include the following:

- Critical city agencies
- Local School Councils
- Parent-Teacher Associations
- Teachers and other employee unions
- Prominent community organizations
- Social media platforms for communicating with parents and the larger school community.

3. Create local school “Health-Safety Teams”

Each school should have a Health Safety Team (HST) that reports to the principal and is led by a nurse and/or a retired physician. The HST should be drawn from the larger community for testing purposes. The HST should be guided the city or county health department(s). Potential participants on the Team include the following:

- Nurse, consulting physician, trained medical assistant
- Retired health care workers
- Advanced college and university healthcare majors
- Paraprofessionals (parents and community members)
- City/County Health Department medical liaisons
- External partners (hospitals and community clinics)

4. Develop capacity to conduct school-based COVID testing and tracking

Testing, as well as temperature checks, need to be available at every school site for staff, children and, if need be, families. Schools should also have the capacity to assist public health agencies in “contact tracing.” School administrators staff need to be tested first. A suggested testing approach is as follows:

Testing approach

- Testing should begin no later than two weeks prior to the start of the school year.
- Testing all faculty and staff followed by the testing of students. Optional school-based testing could be offered to family members.
- Systemic, periodic temperature taking of asymptomatic students and staff:
 - Temperature taking a condition of returning to work for faculty and staff.
 - Request parents to sign a permission slip at the beginning of the year allowing reasonable periodic temperature taking.
 - Optional school-based testing could be offered to family members.
- Negative results communicated electronically; positive results communicated directly.
- Contact tracing for school staff and students who test positive.
- Work with each principal to prepare schedules for testing:
 - Conduct tests by classroom (elementary) and by homeroom (high school)
 - K-12 tests two grades each day
 - High school tests two grades each week

- When testing indoors, isolate testing to an area out of the flow of school foot traffic and no one should be permitted to enter who is not being tested or working the testing site.
- Separate test-takers in the waiting area.
- Limit the number of people to be tested during any period based on medical advice.
- Two-week quarantine or a longer length requested by local health care professionals.

5. Schools must develop capacity and protocols for managing students and staff who have COVID symptoms. Guidelines should include the following:

- Post alerts such as signs and posters in strategic places in the facility with instructions for students, parents and staff with fever or symptoms.
- Advise parents to regularly check their children’s temperature and to advise them they should put on a cloth face covering, regardless of symptoms, before leaving their home. (*e.g.*, via texts or robocalls)
- Instruct parents to notify the school if their child has a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 (including cough or shortness of breath, sore throat, or systemic symptoms like myalgias or chills.)
- Instruct parents to immediately notify the school if a non-student member of their family tests positive (parent sibling, grandparent)
- If they have symptoms, they should immediately contact their health care provider or be connected to one through the school. **Under no circumstances should they come to the school campus.**
- HST and/or school-based health care providers (school nurse) has the capacity to conduct a temperature check or a COVID test; the latter with consent of the parent and approval of the physician.
- Students and/or staff with sudden onset symptoms must immediately be placed in separate isolated area until they can safely depart the premises.
- PPE must be kept stocked on campus, even on non-testing days, in the eventuality that sudden onset cases develop during business hours and a minor student needs supervision until a parent or guardian can pick them up.
- If the examiner is not using a “touchless” system of screening or temperature checking, he or she should change gloves with each new patient.

6. Establish and enforce strict quarantine procedures and school disinfectant protocols

Schools policy should include quarantine for staff and students who test positive. Students who exhibit COVID symptoms must be removed from school by a legal guardian, and staff must adhere to strict building sanitization protocols to minimize the spread of the virus. School protection essentials include the following:

- Older teachers and those with underlying medical conditions could initially remain home while younger teachers and children return
- Two-week quarantine or longer duration recommended by health care professionals for staff or students testing positive.
- Contact tracing and optional testing for family members for staff and students testing positive.

- Remote instruction and support for those students in quarantine.
- Re-test and temperature monitoring of returning staff and students.
- Strict adherence to the CDC for keeping facilities clean and disinfecting areas after suspected/confirmed COVID case.
- Close off areas visited by ill persons. Open outside doors and windows and use ventilating fans to increase air circulation in the area.
- Wait 24 hours or as long as practical before beginning cleaning and disinfection.
- Cleaning staff should clean and disinfect all areas visited by the ill person, focusing especially on high use areas.
- Assign one member of janitorial staff to repeatedly and methodically wipe all door knobs and handles multiple times a day.
- Liberal placement of hand sanitizer dispensers – every classroom and strategically placed in school common areas.
- Upgrade all bathroom hand soap to antibacterial soap and instruct teachers to periodically demonstrate proper hand-washing protocols especially in the lower grades. Install picture-based posters in all student bathrooms.

7. Adopt and enforce practical comprehensive social distancing strategy

There should be common sense procedures for social distancing that minimizes contact and provide safe spacing. This includes classroom seating, lunchrooms and common spaces, physical education, movement between classrooms, and during student testing. Split scheduling and blended (onsite and online) learning can minimize contact. Areas of focus include the following:

- Classroom seating
- Social distancing in lunchrooms and common spaces.
- Class size limits and in-class distancing
- Minimizing student movement
- Physical education protocols
- Supervised recess to ensure social distancing and develop structured activities for students to run and play (outside dance parties, Simon Says, etc.) that can be done six feet apart.
- Designated isolated testing and screening areas
- Designated quarantine areas for students and faculty with COVID 19 symptoms.
- Split scheduling combining site based and remote learning, most appropriate for the high schools.

8. Accelerate the push for every school to offer quality remote learning & support

Developing “Remote Learning Platforms” should be schools’ overriding objective in the summer months. Not only will this ensure educational continuity, but it will provide the means to increase learning time, expand educational choices, extend academic and social-emotional interventions and provide additional teacher supports. Building a comprehensive remote learning capability requires the following:

- Identify competencies to be prioritized and determine how to best deliver instruction for those first.
- Identify the needs of teachers to facilitate digital or blended learning options.
- Provide teachers with online training and retraining opportunities as well as teacher coaching and mentoring.
- Ensure that all teachers have access to appropriate and effective curriculum and instructional models and materials.
- Assess teacher and student access to devices and the internet. Disseminate devices and support with access to internet service as needed.
- Ensure that guidance is provided to support the unique needs of students who require additional support including, but not limited to, students with disabilities and English Learners.
- Develop a plan for technical support for families, possibly including a remote call center for technology questions and technical assistance.
- Provide teacher/student interaction through online platforms, phone calls, office hours, or homework hotlines.

9. Comprehensive teacher and school staff support are needed to help school personnel adjust to the new normal and focus on instruction

Teachers and school staff have not been immune to the full impact COVID as their finances, job security, their health and health of their families, and their general way of life have potentially been adversely impacted. Schools need to attend to the “other” teacher and school staff needs to enable them to adjust to the new normal and continue to provide quality instruction and support. These needs are as follows:

- Effective communication must be a top priority during this time. Once the school system has finalized its staffing plan, it should develop a clear communication plan to inform all staff of the expectations for their service and to create opportunities for ongoing communication.
- A plan to provide the system with budgetary stability and predictability, so teachers can plan effectively and deliver instruction with minimal disruption.
- Gather the system’s key leaders to design an informed staffing plan that enables the schools to operate in the “new normal.”
- Ensure faculty and staff compensation is not interrupted. If there is potential for interruption, transparency is mandatory to reduce uncertainty and anxiety.
- Clear priorities and expectations for all employees including consistency in scheduling and the assignment of specific tasks.
- CDC aligned protocols for employee health and safety.
- Reasonable flexibility for employees who need childcare coverage or those who have been exposed to the virus.
- Reasonable flexibility for teachers and employees who are over 50 or have underlying conditions

10. Secure and support adequate technology infrastructure

All students should have access to a device and reliable internet, now more than ever. Student access to technology enables continuous learning and in the (new) normal can: (1) minimize

common disruptions like “snow days;” (2) serve students who are absent from school for health reasons; and (3) expand educational offerings, services and support. The basics to building a quality technology infrastructure include the following:

- Identify which students do not have access to the Internet and/or a device. You may have already surveyed your families. If not, we have created a survey that you can leverage.
- Formulate a plan to provide connectivity for students who do not have it, including distributing hotspots to families.
- Choose a plan that best fits your needs. Internet Enabled Device (All in One Device): A device that would provide both Internet access and WIFI (T-Mobile, Empower Ed)
- Determine which device to provide students with spotty or limited access at home. Consider protective add-ons and one-stop management for the device.
- Select devices that can be bought or leased with a three-year hardware with in-home/onsite service after remote diagnosis.
 - Investigate the cost of insuring devices at minimum ensure costs for lost or damaged leased devices.
- Order device using consortium pricing directly through the manufacturer/reseller (Dell, DETEL, HP, etc.)
- Determine how to provide technical support for devices.
- “Shared School District Support Help Desk” to support parents and students with questions for any school-issued device.
- Create and maintain a distribution log with accurate parental contact information and a recovery plan for students who no longer need them, move out of district, or matriculate.
 - Parental sign-out form
 - Acknowledgement that devices supplied by the district remain district property and must be returned to the district in good condition.
 - Instructions and/or orientation on device use, *i.e.*, proper care, proper charging, kept away from liquid, secured at all times (not left in autos or book bags left unattended, etc.
 - Acknowledgement that school will be notified immediately if device is damaged, lost or stolen.
- Create a standardized policy for repeated offenses with regard to district-owned devices. Clearly and diplomatically communicate the policy in advance.

Author: Paul G. Vallas is a former Chicago budget director and CEO of Chicago Public Schools and Superintendent of the Louisiana Recovery School District responsible for reopening and rebuilding schools after Hurricane Katrina.