

OPINION

A Blueprint for Reopening This Fall: What Will It Take to Get Schools Ready?

The 6 areas of work needed to reopen schools

By John P. Bailey & Frederick M. Hess

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Families and communities need America's schools to be ready to reopen as soon as public-health officials signal that it's safe. The nation has recently been reminded just how vital schools are. They 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. Today's packets and remote learning efforts are at best an inferior substitute for a small portion of this. [Back to Story](#)

This makes it urgent that schools find a way to reopen this fall in a way that adapts to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Of course, reopening in a manner that's safe and responsive will involve novel challenges. That's why leaders must begin planning immediately. But let's be clear: Leading public-health officials—including the habitually cautious Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—have indicated that they expect schools will be able to reopen this fall.

What will it take to get schools ready, amidst enormous uncertainty? Together with a group of 19 accomplished educational leaders—including former state chiefs, superintendents, federal education officials, and school leaders—we have sketched a **blueprint that can help educators, communities, and state and federal officials** rise to the challenge.

The blueprint is informed by the following assumptions, all drawn on the most current guidance from health officials:

- Schools will remain closed this spring but will reopen in the fall (albeit with the potential of localized, 14- to 28-day rolling closures triggered by new outbreaks).
- 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 teachers, administrators, school staff, and students who may be at heightened risk from COVID-19 because of their age or other health conditions.
- 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.

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In planning for the contingencies implied by these assumptions, there are four principles that should guide preparations 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 are responsible for meeting the needs of all students, including the distinctive needs of students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English-language learners.
- Schools are obliged to find ways to serve all students, even during times of disruption when remote learning requires students to connect from home.
- 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.
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While readers should refer to the blueprint for the particulars, there are at least six key buckets of work ahead.

1. General considerations. Coordination, communication, flexibility, and privacy protections will be crucial. Schools will have to coordinate closely with state and local health officials to develop a unified public-health strategy. They'll need to communicate with stakeholders so that students, families, educators, and community members are clear on expectations for academics and public health. They'll need flexibility as they adapt to unprecedented challenges. And they'll need to review privacy policies with an eye to both remote learning and community health.

2. School operations. 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. Gaps in meal service and distribution plans should be assessed and strengthened. And as for transportation, schools need to devise plans that reflect physical-distancing protocols. All of this will have obvious implications for staffing and costs and is a budget line that Washington should help address.

3. Whole-child supports. Students are experiencing the pandemic in different ways with many going through significant trauma from school closures, friends and family members lost to the virus, and the insecurity created from parents losing jobs. Social-emotional learning and trauma supports will be critical not only during this period of remote learning but also in the next academic years.

4. School personnel. Many educators may be vulnerable to COVID-19, raising questions about how to protect them. 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 re-evaluate their staffing needs.

5. Academics. Disrupting the school year has created broad academic challenges for students, particularly those most vulnerable before the crisis occurred. Schools should prepare for possible intermittent closures next year and have a continuity-of-learning plan in place that serves all kids with either online resources or printed materials. And states need to consider potential assessment challenges, including the implications for traditional accountability measures.

6. Distance learning. 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 didn't work with remote learning, address home-connectivity gaps, and provide teachers the training they need to succeed next year.

This is a moment when all of us—educators, families, and communities—must find ways to ensure that children get back the schools, experiences, and relationships so important to their young lives. America's schools have the opportunity to give children the things that are uniquely possible in the brick-and-mortar schoolhouse while exploring new ways to more fully use technology and community partnerships. When schools get the green light to go, they need to be ready. That work starts now.

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