

## An Idaho School Reopens. Are Its Precautions the 'New Normal'?

By [Evie Blad](#) on [May 4, 2020, 6:17 PM](#)

Share 61



In what would be a typical occurrence any other school year, a school in Nampa, Idaho, is doing something that has become highly unusual during the coronavirus pandemic: welcoming students back into its buildings.

But students' first day back in Nampa Christian School Monday was anything but typical as the private school planned shortened days, modified passing periods, and the cancellation of large-group assemblies and cafeteria lunches.

The move comes as states begin to consider **when to reopen thousands of public schools** shuttered to slow the spread of the coronavirus, and how they will change their operations to keep students and educators safe when they do.

Nampa Christian offers a preview of what other schools may look like when they eventually transition back to in-person instruction.

And it shows some of the challenges others may face in doing the same: The school already had smaller class sizes than its public school peers, and administrators estimated about 30 percent of students remained at home on the first day back, making it easier to avoid crowding, Superintendent Greg Wiles told Education Week.

"I think [public schools] are going to have a lot more variables they are going to have to work through," he said.

The 730-student, prekindergarten through 12th grade school is a rarity in a country where most schools have committed to keeping doors closed for the remainder of the academic year, even in states where governors have lifted closure mandates and stay-home orders. According to Education Week's tracker, 46 states, four U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia have **ordered or recommended school building closures** for the rest of the academic year.

Nampa Christian opted to reopen for the last three weeks of the school year after a majority of parents in a regular survey expressed interest, Wiles said, without citing a specific figure. The school also sought the OK from Southwest District Health, a regional health department, before it committed to reopening, he said, and administrators planned to review procedures after students left for the day Monday.

"You can do everything in theory, but when you put it in practice, you have to say, 'How did it work for us?'" Wiles told Education Week. "So far it's going really well. We are able to do that because we are a small school."

Idaho's stay-at-home order expired on April 30, allowing some businesses to begin reopening. Although public schools are recommended closed for the academic year, under a state plan, individual school districts can choose to reopen if they secure approval from their local health department and **create plans for protecting vulnerable staff members, communicating with parents, and allowing flexibility for families** concerned about the risks of sending students back to school.

But most schools in the state have said they are done for the school year, or haven't yet committed to reopening. Public schools in Nampa remained closed Monday, citing concerns about continued community spread of the virus. Canyon County, where the district is located, had **258 confirmed or probable cases of COVID-19** and seven deaths from the illness as of May 1, according to state data.

The health agency cleared Nampa Christian's plans to open after determining it was committed to working with local officials "to help address changing circumstances."

Here's how the private school is changing some of its practices in response to the coronavirus:

**Modified Schedule:** Nampa Christian will move to a four-day week with shortened days of five to five and a half hours, down from a standard school day of eight hours. That will give teachers more time to prepare for continued online learning needs in addition to in-person instruction, Wiles said. Around the country, some state leaders have suggested schools may reopen with staggered schedules to reduce crowding in common areas as students move into classrooms.

**Continuity of Learning:** Students who can't or don't want to return to school can continue online learning at home, Wiles said. That allows for a less-full building, which makes it easier for students to keep distance in classrooms and hallways. Some teachers are streaming live classroom lectures to students at home, and some are recording their classes to allow for more flexible scheduling. Nationally, some state leaders have suggested such a hybrid approach. Some, in states like Maryland and Washington, have warned schools should prepare to quickly transition back to online learning should the virus resurge in their areas.

**Transportation:** Nampa Christian will not provide its usual bus service so that students won't be clustered in confined spaces. Transportation has been one of the largest social distancing concerns for schools around the country, which already struggled to make do with limited numbers of drivers and vehicles in some areas. Wiles admits this is one change that would be much more difficult for public schools.

**Lunch:** The Idaho school will have students eat cold meals in their classrooms to avoid congregating in the cafeteria, it will not hold assemblies or chapel services, and it has postponed prom and graduation. Some public schools use grab-and-go meal options or "breakfast in the classroom," strategies that could be adapted to confront the pandemic.

**Vulnerable Staff:** Nampa Christian teachers who are at heightened risk for illness continue to teach from home, Wiles said. Students in their classrooms use Chromebooks to do sort of reverse remote learning under the supervision of a substitute teacher. Nationwide, about a third of teachers are over 50, **putting them at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19**, a recent analysis found. The "**Blueprint for Back to School**," released Monday by the American Enterprise Institute, suggests making staff accommodations will be a key issue for schools as they reopen.

**Passing Periods:** Nampa Christian shortened passing periods between classes to prevent students from congregating. And it will require some students to line up six feet apart in hallways to wait for areas to clear before they pass through them.

**Masks:** Masks are optional, Wiles said, but some students and teachers wore them Monday. And the school received a large donation of masks from a local car dealership so that they can offer them for free in the front office. In New Jersey, Gov. Phil Murphy recently suggested students in the Garden State may have to wear masks when they return to school, but some teachers fear that will be a difficult habit to maintain, particularly for younger students.

**Communication:** Before opening, the school sent letters home to parents and videos to students to explain the new protocols. "Yes, we are having school, but it is going to look different," Wiles said, describing the student videos. "Let's respect everybody, because not everybody is willing to be close."

#### **Few Schools Prepared to Reopen**

Few schools are in the position to follow Nampa Christian's lead.

**White House guidelines** on easing restrictions include "gating" criteria to govern reopening of schools and businesses, such as consistently 14 consecutive days of declining rates of flu-like symptoms and documented cases of the coronavirus, and adequate hospital capacity.

Those guidelines call for three phases of reopening for businesses, schools, and workplaces, with school buildings that have been shut down remaining closed in the first phase. That means states would have to see 28 days of declining virus rates for schools to reopen, and even then, they would have to take some extra precautions. Many states have not seen a consistent enough decline to loosen restrictions, and many governors have said they don't have adequate systems needed to trace transmission and guide their containment efforts.

**Read more** about **how schools may look when they reopen**, and **why states are keeping them closed**.

*Photo: Getty*

---

Don't miss another Politics K-12 post. **Sign up here** to get news alerts in your email inbox.

Follow us on Twitter **@PoliticsK12**. And follow the Politics K-12 reporters **@EvieBlad** **@Daarel** and **@AndrewUjifusa**.

Categories: [Coronavirus](#)

Tags: [coronavirus](#) [Idaho](#) [private schools](#) [school closures](#)

### Reprint or License This Article

**Notice:** We recently upgraded our comments. (Learn more [here](#).) If you are logged in as a subscriber or registered user and already have a Display Name on edweek.org, you can post comments. If you do not already have a Display Name, please create one [here](#).

0 Comments [Education Week](#) [Disqus' Privacy Policy](#)

 [Cieslinski](#) ▾

 [Recommend](#)  [Tweet](#)  [Share](#)

[Sort by Oldest](#) ▾



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

 [Subscribe](#)  [Do Not Sell My Data](#)

#### Ground Rules for Posting

We encourage lively debate, but please be respectful of others. Profanity and personal attacks are prohibited. By commenting, you are agreeing to abide by our [user agreement](#).

All comments are public.