



Back-to-school planning in the time of COVID-19 for US K-12 systems

EY-Parthenon Education practice



Our understanding of the situation

More than 50 million students across the nation were impacted by school closures in March and April as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to closures across states have varied — while some districts and charter organizations quickly pivoted to learning remotely, distributing devices, rearranging schedules, and moving to instruction and “office hours” over commercially available technology platforms, many others were slower to respond or faced real challenges in accessing and organizing the resources needed to support students’ continued learning remotely. The effects of the pandemic have been felt by students nationwide, with special populations (including English language learners (ELL) and special education students) particularly susceptible to the negative impacts of such system shocks and requiring additional supports to continue learning during this period.

As of early May, 48 US states had mandated school closures through the end of the school year (SY). There is no consensus yet among school officials whether reopening schools in the fall is probable; most leaders remain divided on the best course of action to take to balance student, societal and economic concerns. For example, while Georgia and California are considering a modified restart model in July for remedial enrichment programs or to begin the school year earlier, respectively, Illinois officials have already indicated that remote learning could continue well into the fall. Many states have declined to give projections for what the fall term may look like in accordance with the fluidity

of the crisis; however, educators will look to state leaders for as much direction as possible as they prepare for the coming school year.

Remote learning is now a priority for all state education agencies, which are pivoting from supporting a crisis response this spring to planning for the 2020-21 school year, which may include additional remote learning. In Florida, for example, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has partnered with the state to provide numerous resources and leading practices for distance learning, including virtual teacher training and an emergency service of 100 free digital courses. The State Department of Education has also

prioritized equity and access for students by presenting considerations for different types of students, such as those with disabilities and ELL. While this is strong progress, there is immense pressure on the state to make the right decisions regarding planning for SY20-21, and Florida is an outlier for the volume of remote learning resources already available with the onset of the pandemic; few other states had anything as comprehensive as FLVS’s offering. Thus, the time is now to move past the spring transitional period and focus on how our education systems will approach potential extended periods of remote learning next fall and beyond.

¹ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

Perspectives on COVID-19 from the EY-Parthenon Education practice

The EY-Parthenon Education practice has engaged in significant research and analysis focused on analyzing what districts can do today to prepare for SY20-21 amid the COVID-19 crisis. Much of our research focuses on the importance of leveraging the short summer months to address what was learned from the “remote learning 1.0” efforts on which districts embarked with little notice this spring, and quickly pivoting to design and support “remote learning 2.0” for SY20-21. While there is hope that some schools or districts may be able to return to in-person operations by fall 2020, there is increasing recognition in many states and districts that the fall will likely require at least some period of remote

learning. Even in districts that are able to reopen in-person for some or all students, planning for both safe and socially distant learning and scenarios involving a switch to remote learning for a period of time will be essential.

Given these considerations, our team has started to think through specific tactical implications of the various back-to-school scenarios for SY20-21. Though there is a range of critical factors that a school district must consider when preparing for whatever SY20-21 has in store, we believe the following six areas warrant significant focus.

Figure 1. Six areas to consider when preparing for SY20-21

Promoting learning and wellness	Academic planning	Social-emotional and mental health support
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How can we improve upon remote learning from the spring experience? ▶ How can we diagnose and accelerate student learning in the fall? ▶ How can we best support educators through different models of educational delivery? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How can we support the social-emotional and mental health of students and educators? ▶ How can we provide a safe learning environment for students and educators, whether remote or in-person?
Supporting students and families	Technology considerations	Family engagement and communication
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How do we make sure we have enough of the right devices for students and educators that support effective teaching and learning? ▶ How do we protect data privacy and maintain cybersecurity with heavier technology use? ▶ How do we expand/augment network access for schools and students? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What information do families need to know, and where/how should we solicit their input? ▶ How can we effectively communicate with families about reopening updates/policies and ways to support student learning?
Enabling safe and equitable learning	Physical space	Resource allocation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How can schools repurpose their existing physical space to adhere to the appropriate social-distancing protocols? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ How can states advise local education agencies as they manage limited resources while facing increasing expenses to provide education under a wholly new model, and what sources of funding might be available to provide incremental support to schools and districts?

² Questions are not meant to be exhaustive.

Our approach to planning for SY20-21

As the situation evolves, these perspectives on remote learning and potential school reopenings should be top of mind for state- and district-level leaders. States currently have a unique opportunity to leading practices and implement them early on in order to address developing student needs. As education agencies and schools work to provide comprehensive guidance to districts in multiple scenarios, diagnostics and playbooks must be developed that address the topics explored above.

Based on conversations with state and district leaders, most are contemplating the following three scenarios, with some variations in each:

1. Online/remote learning to start the year
2. Hybrid, with both in-person instruction and online/remote learning
3. In-person instruction, with social distancing measures

Figure 2. Methods to support a successful start to SY20-21

Approach/activities		Milestones/deliverables
Conduct interviews with state and local leadership to solidify and inform potential reopening scenarios	→	Identification of possible reopening scenarios
Build out your fact base to support districts in assessing their local context, including data on public health, district demographics and additional inputs	→	Tool for district self-assessment and guidance on reopening scenarios, including supporting data or fact base
Design and develop playbooks for each reopening strategy, leveraging input from state and local stakeholders	→	Playbooks to support each reopening scenario
Engage with smaller groups of stakeholders on the design and content of the diagnostic tool, playbook(s) and any additional resources	→	Stakeholder engagement process involving multiple check-ins/working sessions
Develop a communication plan to reach various stakeholder groups regarding playbooks and diagnostics, as well as families and communities	→	Communication plan that supports the launch of playbooks and broader back-to-school communications
Design training to introduce scenarios, diagnostics and playbooks; discuss intended use; and suggest strategies for supporting local adoption	→	Materials and support for training sessions

By starting this summer with a reflection on what worked and what didn't work during the spring of 2020, district leaders can quickly pivot to assess their local contexts and determine which scenario(s) are most relevant to their systems. Access to a diagnostic tool and playbooks can support district leaders in successfully and efficiently preparing for "reopening" for SY20-21. These documents should aim to reduce the ambiguity around the options that exist for restarting schools and provide clear access to resources that districts can use to inform decision-making about which strategy to pursue, given their specific circumstance and/or statewide guidance. The main objective is to support schools and districts in achieving a successful start of SY20-21, regardless of what their "back-to-school" scenario entails. Beyond designing a diagnostic tool and relevant playbooks, we believe significant stakeholder engagement, training and communication are critical to support the design of tools that are locally relevant, and their subsequent launch and widespread use.

Every school and district decision-making process will be unique based on several internal factors (e.g., facility availability, accessibility to devices) and external factors (e.g., statewide health considerations, external stakeholder preferences). Depending on which scenarios institutions choose to deploy, they must be prepared to flexibly transition between variations of the solutions as public health trends dictate. For example, schools considering in-person instruction for the coming school year should anticipate the need to address challenges in enrollment and attendance due to parent safety concerns and teacher health issues. Similarly, districts that employ a hybrid model or leverage in-person instruction will have to use a modified schedule to address social-distancing expectations. By developing a set of guidelines and self-assessment processes, schools and districts can be better prepared for SY20-21.

Finally, it is important to remember that numerous schools and districts are experiencing the same or similar challenges in developing a long-term remote-learning plan. This is an opportunity to share leading practices on what processes work well and what to avoid. The ultimate priority of all institutions is the health and safety of its students and educators. While school and district leaders are not public health experts, they will need to be prepared to act on guidance from health authorities and collaborate to find the best approaches for serving their students.





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