How should we educate our children in the 2020–21 school year?

Reopening Schools Safely in the Age of COVID

A Preliminary Guide for School Leaders

American Federation of School Administrators
AFSA, AFL-CIO





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The American Federation of School Administrators represents school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, supervisors, and directors and managers in school districts that work on curriculum, student services, school transportation, school food services and school safety, just to name a few.

Our members are advocating for excellence and equity in all of our schools, workplaces and communities. AFSA members are leaders in our schools and communities, and are charged with the privilege and responsibility of helping to mold our nation's students into successful, mindful individuals.

As school leaders, AFSA members are constantly working for better public schools and systems of education. With regard to education reform, AFSA members support reforms that put students first.

Acknowledgments

We thank all of the AFSA members and leaders who took personal time to research and write this guide; it could not have been completed without the hard work and dedication of the following people:

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A special recognition to Marco Trbovich and Chiara Coletti for helping provide the words and vision to get this guide, from a list of ideas, into the hands of our members.

Dear School Leaders:

In almost every community around this great nation, there are daily discussions about the unresolved COVID-19 pandemic and the inevitable question that flows from it: "How should we educate our children in the upcoming school year?"

Some say we should fully reopen school. Others suggest a partial reopening. Yet others say we need to continue exclusively along the online/distance learning track we started last spring.

After months of research by the medical and scientific community, and thoughtful dialogue with education professionals, we conclude that at least until there is a vaccine, there is no single solution that encompasses every school district in the nation.

In fact, when asking questions about your school's needs, you probably come up with different answers to the same questions, even from school to school within the same communities. Realistically, the opening of schools this fall will be a hybrid of all of the above, and will cost your community a great deal of money to make it work successfully.

With that in mind, we have prepared this preliminary guide for principals and other school leaders who will be charged with creating successful academic learning environments for our students, and who will be held accountable no matter what decision is made.

As you move forward, three indisputable facts stand in the forefront of reopening schools:

1. **The safety of our students, school district employees and the community must be paramount.**
2. **Parents must play a prominent role in determining what a school day looks like, and remain engaged in the implementation process.**
3. **A safe reopening will cost a great deal of money.**

We very much want to return to our everyday jobs. We miss seeing our students, being with them and helping them grow and mature—that is why we became educators in the first place. For us, distance learning serves an important purpose at a time like this, but it does not equal in-person learning. It is insufficient to the demands of mind and heart.



AFSA President Ernest Logan

The majority of students need the community and the support systems they can find only in their schools. Yes, students are in touch 24/7 with their friends—by text, by social media or through FaceTime and the like—but to form meaningful bonds and grow socially, they need to connect in person with each other. To be fully engaged in learning, they require face-to-face interaction with their teachers.

And, sometimes, to get the personal help they need, they require the real, physical presence of their friends, their favorite teacher, their school counselor and their deans, assistant principals and principal to help them work things out. In a time of social and emotional upheaval like this one, they have never needed us more.

For all these reasons, school leaders want to reopen their schools, on time and in person. We want to reopen them because there is no place like school to ensure our students' academic, social and emotional progress.

This guide is the result of collaboration between our dedicated AFSA colleagues across the country. It is a starting point to the planning process, rather than a be all and end all.

Even as we head to publication, the information on community infection rates changes daily, advice from the scientists and health experts continues to be updated, and the understanding of the challenges faced by political leaders, educators and parents on the best way to open schools becomes more real.

Therefore, you must constantly take the pulse of your full school community and consider all these factors as you move forward in the planning process—and be nimble and flexible to change as needed.

We will continue to listen to you and work with you to do what is best for our children.

In unity,

Ernest A. Logan

Reopening Schools Safely in the Age of COVID

No one looks forward to restoring opportunities for the educational and emotional growth of our nation's children more than the leaders of our nation's schools. We believe it is best for children to be in school buildings interacting with educators and each other, and what is best for children is best for us. Therefore, we are one with our students and their parents in our commitment to overcoming the challenges posed by reopening schools safely in the age of COVID-19.

Indeed, the reopening now being contemplated nationwide by state governments and school districts inevitably means vastly expanded responsibilities for school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, supervisors, school directors and managers of curriculum, transportation, student services, food services and safety, to name just a few.

As school leaders, we know how complex it is to create and manage a successful school and academic environment in the best of times. As the people who will be charged with implementing the goals and aspirations of communities moving forward, we promise to be transparent in the process, and we ask that communities be realistic in the expectations they set forth.

Aware of the daunting challenges our members and their communities face in reopening schools, the elected officers and General Executive Board of the American Federation of School Administrators, AFSA, AFL-CIO, convened a national task force of front-line administrative and supervisory experts. These individuals are just some of those who will be required to implement the opening plan, manage the plan, supervise the plan, monitor the plan and adjust the plan as needed around the United States.

These experienced school leaders examined in depth the scope of expanded responsibilities posed by providing quality learning, consistent with the scientific guidelines set forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for reopening schools. They focused on one stated goal: providing the best education possible based on the safest environment that can be created for our students, parents, educational staff and communities at large.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our task force for its exceptional work, which forms the basis of the guidance and recommendations set forth in this guide. We also are grateful for the vision of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose work in developing "A Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities" moved the conversation on school reopening forward with guidance of value to our members.

We promise to be transparent in the process, and we ask that communities be realistic in the expectations they set forth.

We share the recommendations in this guide fully aware that many schools have neither the resources to reopen under optimum conditions for learning, nor the possibility of teaching remotely, in cases where many students lack either computers or internet access, and many educators lack the training for delivering lessons online. This digital divide is further complicated in communities where significant numbers of students are English Language Learners.

A central focus of reopening, therefore, must be developing an implementation that takes into account the diverse needs of students, educators and staff, while drawing on the concerns and views of parents within the school community.

Parental involvement and engagement is essential to the success of any program and you will want to develop a number of communication channels to allow input, ideas and feedback. These tools should include email, social media, texts, online meetings and surveys, just to name a few.

In addition, a plan should address oversight of assignments to ensure that safety practices are being implemented fully, consistent with CDC scientific guidelines and the guidelines issued by state authorities. School reopening assumes the absolute need for close and continuing collaboration between the school district and local health authorities.

Executing a plan requiring that children wear masks and practice rigorous physical distancing may prove the most daunting of the challenges posed by reopening. Children are social by nature. The very young ones have difficulty understanding the need for physical distancing. For adolescents, so reliant on peer contact, distancing can be downright painful.

School reopening assumes the absolute need for close and continuing collaboration between the school district and local health authorities.

This guide offers school districts a set of principles and practices essential for reopening. It also addresses the resource needs for reopening safely, and the importance of states and school districts addressing these needs.

While our focus is how to get students back in the classroom, we cannot ignore the fact that online/ distance learning is part of our learning ecosystem today and into the near future. It is imperative that school districts, states and the federal government continue to invest in enhancing these learning tools to make them more powerful and effective in our education mix.

Liability

No one is better equipped professionally to assume the challenge of reopening than AFSA school leaders.

However, policies are yet to be determined on the question of liability for COVID-19 cases that may arise as a result of reopening. Prior to President Trump's June rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, those attending were required to sign a waiver releasing the Trump campaign from liability if the attendee were to fall ill.

How will communities address this issue?

- Will families have to sign a waiver releasing schools and employees from liability and is it enforceable?
- Will school districts, states or the federal government take on liability for all individuals responsible for opening schools?

Districts should make clear the framework for all school opening policies and procedures in writing to school leaders. All plans developed at a school level should have sign-off from the central office to protect against personal liabilty.

No matter how many safety protocols are put in place, there is no way to create a perfect environment. Children and adults will get sick. Schools will need to be shut down and it will impact education and the social-emotional well-being of communities and families. However, big investments in the right protocols and solid planning can minimize this likelihood and its consequences.

Once you have read the guidelines and developed a local implementation plan, we urge you to join us in actively lobbying Congress and state legislatures more urgently than ever for the additional resources and protections necessary for ensuring both the safety and continued learning of our students, and the protections and professional development necessary for educators.



ILLINOIS PLAN

"While the plans will be local, Illinois Education Superintendent Carmen Ayala acknowledged the State Board of Education would not review the individual district rules to ensure they complied with safety guidelines. Instead, Ayala said it would be up to local school administrators and local health officials to work together."

Translation by one AFSA Task Force Member:

"If anything goes wrong in your district, it's your butt that is on the line."

Costs

It is essential early on to make whomever mandates reopening schools—school boards, superintendents, city and county governments and state lawmakers—aware of the significantly increased costs for safe and hygienic school facilities. Keeping schools clean will not come cheap. For the most part, these costs do not take into account the additional investments needed to refine and improve distance/online learning programs. They only look at how to keep people safe once the doors are open.

Here are some points to bear in mind:

- The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) estimate that to reopen safely for the 2020–2021 school year, an average school district—one with 3,659 students, eight school buildings, 183 classrooms, 329 staff members and 40 school buses—would incur nearly $1.8 million in expenses for such things as additional staff, cleaning products and additional deep cleanings.
- When applying the AASA/ASBO calculations to a district like New York City, where AFSA CSA Local 1 staffs 1,722 schools and educates more than 1.12 million students, that figure jumps into the hundreds of millions of dollars needed just to handle basic sanitary needs. Most AFSA locals are in large urban centers, so the numbers should be closer to the New York City estimate than that for the "average" school district used by AASA/ASBO.
- While we have not run our own set of numbers, some in the education community have indicated that the AASA/ASBO numbers are at the low end of the projections. In its guide, AFT asks the federal government to "provide at least $175 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund distributed directly to local education agencies and institutions of higher education, with minimal state set-asides, in an equitable and targeted fashion."
- At the end of June, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) submitted an estimate to the U.S. Senate of the projected costs that school systems will face in reopening safely this fall. According to CCSSO estimates, school systems will need flexibility within the CARES Act, and between $158.1 billion and $244.6 billion in total additional funding, to reopen school buildings safely and serve all students in the next academic year.

Once again, it is important to note that these costs only define increased sanitary needs and, in most cases, do not include resources for enhancing the effectiveness of distance/online learning, including professional development, that would be used in hybrid systems.

According to CCSSO estimates, school systems will need flexibility within the CARES Act, and between $158.1 billion and $244.6 billion in total additional funding, to reopen school buildings safely and serve all students in the next academic year.



Designing an Implementation Plan

Creating an implementation plan that establishes how reopening can be administered consistent with CDC scientific guidelines and the guidelines issued by your state authorities, and what the scope of your accountability will be as school leaders in this process, is essential. It is recommended, therefore, that the plan developed for your school address several overarching principles, including:

- Realistic expectations and objectives.
- Clearly defined lines of authority.
- Scope of management oversight.
- Monitoring to ensure oversight.
- A realistic budget to meet the needs defined.
- Methods for making adjustments as needed.
- Parental involvement and ongoing engagement enhanced by frequent parent surveys at the school and district levels.
- Attention to diverse student needs, with equity at the forefront of decision making.

While these categories provide a frame of reference for developing an implementation plan, no one size fits all, given the extraordinary differences in the size and makeup of the nation's schools and student populations.

With that perspective in mind, this guide addresses reopening as it relates to the diverse range of student populations common to many schools and the wide array of concerns many parents face, and recommends specific approaches to these needs and concerns, including:

- Early childhood.
- Elementary education.
- Secondary education.
- Special education.

In addition to focusing on students' needs, an implementation plan must address two other critical groups:

- School support staff.
- Central office and its employees.

By identifying the full spectrum of audiences whose needs must be addressed to ensure safety while nurturing learning and emotional growth, school leaders then will be positioned to craft an implementation plan that addresses crucial functions.



Developing School-Based Safety Strategies

As you begin the process of developing a plan for your school, do not work in a silo. Bring a team of stakeholders together who will be impacted. Collaboration is key to hearing from all vested parties who must carry out the reopening of schools.

Parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, school engineers, custodial staffs, school office personal, central office staff and students all need to be part of the discussion. The best plans will be ones developed with everyone's understanding and consensus. It will help remove uncertainty and fear.

To ensure safe learning and working environments for students and staff alike, the implementation plan you develop should focus on the unique physical layout of your school.

It should:

- Comply with physical distancing requirements as defined by a state's public health and instructional guidelines for reopening.
- Address continued access and connectivity.
- Provide staff with adequate time and training to prepare for opening.
- Make decisions early for scheduling and communicating with families.
- Develop options for students and staff unable to return to school or work.

Sanitizing Extensively

A primary objective among the many challenges your school-based implementation plan must address is ensuring sanitary learning and working environments. Reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 through cleaning and disinfection is a crucial aspect of reopening schools that requires careful planning.

A regimen for sanitizing and cleaning needs to be developed that includes:

- Reducing the risk of exposure by regular cleaning of surfaces and objects before school opens, after closing, and during the course of the school day, where appropriate.
- Regularly disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, such as tables, doorknobs, light switches, windows, countertops, phones, desks, handles, keyboards, touch screens and general classroom supplies.
- Establishing a regimen that includes training and protections for the custodial staff responsible for doing the required cleaning.

In addition, consideration should be given to:

- Eliminating hand dryers in bathrooms.
- Installing paper towel dispensers.
- Regularly sanitizing all public areas, including restrooms, lunchrooms and gymnasiums.
- Sanitizing early childhood education centers before, between and after sessions, as well as areas used for after-school programs.
- Sanitizing lunchrooms and schoolyards daily after use by groups of students, as well as lunchrooms used by teachers and staff.
- As is evident from the scope of cleaning and sanitizing cited, there will need to be specific training on appropriate sanitation for custodial staff, and multiples shifts for cleaning before, during and after students arrive, using products that are safe for students and staff who are sensitive to smells and allergens.







Ensuring Clean Hands and Physical Distancing

Handwashing stations or sanitizers should be provided as students enter the school; this may pose significant logistic challenges. For example, school leaders should assess the viability of creating mandatory handwashing stations at points of entry, as well as staff to assist in ensuring washing or sanitizing is enforced—especially for younger students and those with special needs.

If hand sanitizers are used, plans should address the necessary volume, storage and safety capacity for these supplies in a school. It also would be necessary to request, in advance, district and/or state funding for these mandatory practices and supplies.

Implementation plans should reflect that in middle and secondary schools, sanitizing stations and supervision also would be required at multiple access points, as well as additional support staff near the entry point for the start of school, at the cafeteria for lunches, and around sports fields and quad areas.

Overseeing younger children will require additional supervisory and custodial staff for maintaining cleaning and sanitizing practices, perhaps at one-to-one ratios.

Screening for Symptoms

Thorough COVID-19 screening requires a wide array of personnel and tasks depending on the age of students being supervised. For instance, schools should consider screening for symptoms prior to children getting on school buses. If that is not possible, screening should occur before they enter the school, especially in early childhood centers.

Plans for isolation and parent/guardian contact will be needed if a student shows any symptoms or has a temperature. Given the serious health concerns, parent/guardian(s) MUST adhere to a policy of response, availability and pickup of the ill child.

When a COVID-19 isolation room hits capacity, it is probably time to consider closing a school down for a period of time.

A level of staff appropriate for meeting the safety and sanitation needs of the student population will be necessary to move students into and through the school efficiently.

AFSA thinks all support staff will need to be screened and their temperatures taken by appropriate health care or other trained personnel before entering the campus, and all employees working in schools will need to wear masks (and gloves when necessary), and maintain physical distancing at all times. In fact, trained staff will be required to arrive early to check and set up testing stations. Security personnel will be needed to screen visitors at each campus.

Multiple doorways should be used according to grade level or class location to avoid crowds accumulating. Safe areas should be designated for students getting on or off buses, as well as at sanitizing or handwashing stations. Staff should be screened in a different room from students.



Scanners will be necessary in each classroom for early childhood students. Elementary school students, meanwhile, will need their temperatures checked upon entry. Markers also will be needed in secondary schools for forming lines and spacing students.

School offices will need special attention. School secretaries, for example, will need additional training to provide first aid when a sick student is in the nurse's office, as well as protection from liability for assuming these responsibilities. And nurses will need to have a health officer there, who will be contracted for specific time periods and for enforcing doctors' rules.

It will be necessary in the health clinic to designate areas for non-COVID-related issues vs. areas for addressing COVID-related concerns, in part to ensure that students with special health needs have safe access to the nurse for regular visits.

When a COVID-19 isolation room hits capacity, it is probably time to consider closing a school down for a period of time.



Reducing Class Size for Physical Distancing

Clearly, ushering students into school safely is essential and highly challenging. Keeping them safe once they are in class will prove no less so.

To achieve this for students in early childhood settings, for instance, an implementation plan should include changes to the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale® (ECERS) and SACERS, the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale®, that take into account the necessity of physical distancing, based on the actual space available in the classrooms they will be occupying.

For elementary school students, there will have to be a limit of 10 students assigned to a specific classroom to achieve physical distancing, with only five students allowed per recess group. Achieving this goal of reduced class size may in fact require adding additional classes.

In secondary schools, the number of students in a given class will be determined by a room's capacity to accommodate six-foot physical distancing. In addition, plexiglass may have to be added for each desk and table to assist in achieving physical distancing.

Physical education classes should be conducted outdoors, weather permitting. In milder climates, it may be possible to reduce class size and increase the number of available classes by conducting academic learning outdoors, if space is available. Furthermore, hybrid educational models may have to be developed for middle and high school students who excel in their studies, should the use of split-scheduling and the demands for added space to practice physical distancing hamper the pace of their learning.

Moreover, school districts must budget for the added cost of hiring more teachers and staff members and obtaining additional furniture and other supplies to meet the extensive new requirements for achieving the CDC's physical-distancing guidelines.

Planning for Intermittent Quarantine

In the event that circumstances necessitate intermittent quarantining, it may prove necessary to return for a time to online learning. Should such circumstances arise, several measures should be considered, including:

- Preparing a virtual learning protocol.
- Creating a platform for posting work assignments.
- Developing video conferences for instruction.
- Offering professional development on how to teach online effectively.
- Making every effort within your capability to ensure that devices and internet access are provided for all students and teachers. (Special considerations will have to be made for children from communities without dependable internet access and for those who are English Language Learners.)
- Creating educationally sound and engaging academic content and tools.
- Upgrading to more robust digital platforms at schools.



Planners also may consider creating virtual schools or classrooms for at-risk students and for parents who may not wish to send their children back to school in the fall.

Establishing Split Schedules

In instances when adding space and reducing class sizes does not achieve adequate physical distancing, it may be necessary to institute forms of split scheduling, like half- and alternate-day programs. Often, the programming staff will have to call upon their finest powers of ingenuity.

If implemented, these alternatives will require more custodians to disinfect between schedules. Split scheduling also will impact central office staff who have direct connections with the schools, such as transportation, custodial and food service workers.

AFSA locals should be prepared to engage in collective bargaining should districts seek to implement plans, including increased responsibility, that do not conform to existing collective bargaining agreements.



Staggering Mealtimes

Programmers may want to establish multiple lunch schedules for students to facilitate physical distancing. If this approach is pursued, work schedules for food service workers, who often have shorter hours, may need to be adjusted.

Staggered mealtimes likely would require multiple handwashing stations as well. It also might be necessary to create a cashless service to avoid touching money, and to order food via keypads.

In some cases, staggering mealtimes may lead to students eating in their classrooms, though this only would be viable if sufficient staff are available, handwashing facilities are nearby and immediate trash collection and cleanup are possible.

Reconsidering Transportation

Given the complexity of sanitizing, split scheduling and numerous other changes amid COVID-19, staggered start and end times are probable, engendering more complicated transportation needs.

It is likely additional bus drivers will have to be hired and more buses used.

Drivers may need to start their shifts earlier, so they can be screened for COVID-19 symptoms and then replaced if need be.

Staggered seating must be used, and interiors must be sanitized, cleaned and inspected after every drop-off as well as at night. Ideally, students also should be screened before boarding the bus. In all cases, they must wear masks while aboard.

Some parents, however, may choose to drive their children to school, or use public transportation where it exists. This can be determined by including a related question about their preferences on a parent survey. If more parents are driving their children to school, support might be needed to manage traffic patterns.

Finally, field trips that require transportation should not be scheduled.



Students with Diverse Needs

We are concerned that special education, English Language Learners and at-risk students may be returning to a school program where the protocols, lack of proper staffing and changes in routine may impact their learning process. Additionally, all safety precautions must meet their needs.

A single return plan will not work for all students and staff. Some students might take a significant amount of time to adapt and transition to a school program that differs from their previous experience.

In addition, services provided to some special education students might conflict with certain CDC protocols, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, feeding and nursing plans and the like. These situations might have to be addressed with public health officials and advocates.

There should be some collaboration with other committees to ensure students receiving special education services are not considered in isolation.



Even with appropriate funding, staff shortages in some cases might greatly impact the ability to implement an effective plan for special education, English Language Learners and at-risk students returning to school.

Creating Isolation Spaces

Isolation spaces need to be designated for students, including clear guidelines that dictate the criteria for assignment to an isolation room. Separate protocols need to be developed for after-school programs, as well as separate spaces for non-COVID-19 illnesses.

Clear protocols should be drawn up based on district-mandated policies, and trained staff should be assigned for supervision, rescreening and disinfecting. Rooms likely will have to be repurposed, and staff will have to be relocated as needed.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff also will have to be provided at all times. If possible, staff assigned to isolation areas should have access to student contact information, as well as access to a computer and phone in order to contact children's families, if necessary.

Isolation rooms should have ventilation to the outside and a proper heating, ventilation and air conditioning unit that is cleaned regularly. Air handling units have to be checked frequently to ensure air is being filtered.

Larger areas such as gyms can serve as isolation rooms, though an office may prove more suitable for elementary school children. Having the room located near the nurse's office should be considered.

Confidentiality should be maintained at all times for students and staff in isolation, and posters should be mounted to help students understand why they need to stay in isolation and why it's important to wear PPE.

Communicating Evidence of Contact or Cases

It is essential to communicate directly and immediately with parents and the community with information about how you have responded to any knowledge of COVID-19 cases among students or staff.

To achieve this important communications objective, you should employ a wide range of tools, including:

- Robocalls.
- Parent portal platforms.
- Text messages.
- School websites, social media and newsletters.
- Outreach to local news media.

The optimum approach is to establish mandatory online communications training modules for parents, staff and students to familiarize themselves with before school reopens.

Indeed, clearly defined protocols need to be established and observed for communicating with students, parents and staff who have come into close or sustained contact with confirmed cases.

Above all, immediate notice should occur if there is an incident, a known positive COVID-19 case or a change in protocols, as the expanded responsibility we have been given for developing reopening plans strongly implies our accountability for the plan's implementation and outcomes.

It is imperative that all involved with communicating this information be trained to understand and use health privacy laws.

The HIPAA Privacy Rule establishes national standards to protect individuals' medical records and other personal health information and applies to health plans, health care clearinghouses and those health care providers that conduct certain health care transactions electronically.

The rule requires appropriate safeguards to protect the privacy of personal health information, and sets limits and conditions on the uses and disclosures that may be made of such information without patient authorization.

The rule also gives patients rights over their health information, including rights to examine and obtain a copy of their health records, and to request corrections.

Modifying Health Care Assignments

The complications brought about by reduced class sizes, split schedules and other changes to pre-COVID-19 practices likely will necessitate reorganizing school-based public health protocols.



For instance, districts may need multiple nursing staff for schools, and possibly districtwide flex teams so that health care staff can be transferred to hot spots.

Since nurses cannot be removed from such high-need populations as students receiving special education services, creating flex teams may require partnering with universities or agencies to create districtwide capacity.

In addition, access to the nurse's office should be limited to avoid contact between students who are ill and the general population, and secondary areas will need to be established for triage of non-COVID-19 student illnesses or injuries, possibly by repurposing space around the existing nurse's office.

Monitoring School Facilities

Protocols for allowing access to the school by anyone—student, parent, visitor or vendor—should be established and assiduously followed to maintain safety, hygiene and security.

For example, it is recommended that no outside visitor or random parent visits be permitted within the school confines or classrooms. Rules should be established for students being dropped off at curbside or at the school's front door.

For early pickup, the child should be escorted to the front door to be picked up by a parent or authorized individual. Adults authorized to pick up students ideally should be restricted to one per family. To minimize the numbers entering the school, it is advisable to conduct parent-teacher conferences online or by phone.

AFSA recommends that any and all food service personnel or visitors from district-level offices be required to wear facial protective equipment and to wash their hands upon entering the lobby of the school.

School safety agents will screen all visitors for facial masks, and any individual entering the building—including children—will have to have their temperature checked.

To achieve these levels of safety and security, additional personnel will need to be assigned to all entrance and exit stations—further evidence of the need for additional resources to meet the challenge of reopening amid COVID-19.

Providing Broad-Based Training and Support

Realistically, the training necessary to cope with COVID-19 must reach beyond staff to students and parents as well. Consideration should be given, for instance, to creating webinars and videos before the planned reopening that offer guidance to all affected audiences. For schools with English Language Learners, all information and training must be provided to students and families in the appropriate languages.

In addition, virtual community nights and/or town hall meetings may be offered, led by professionals in designated areas. Virtual workshops can be held for students prior to their returning to the building. Audiences for these workshops can be captured by registration and can be shared with schools. Students not attending such virtual workshops may be required to participate in mandatory training before returning to school.

AFSA also recommends considering staggering the start date for different groups to provide an opportunity to train them in safe procedures. For example, under such an approach, children of essential workers would start returning before families with other options available to them.



Training also needs to be included through Safe Schools on the use of PPE. These policies and procedures should be disseminated to all students and staff, clearly stating the type of PPE, its intended use, and basic instructions on how to wear and care for it.

Mental Health Issues

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 crisis has unleashed a torrent of stress and anxiety throughout the school community. The true scope of the resulting mental health crisis has yet to be seen. You yourselves have been affected in ways big and small. While many of you are dealing with your own fears, grief and loss, you also are taking on the pain and fear of the teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, parents and children who depend on you. As always, the children are your most immediate concern.

So while thinking about broad-based support and training, let us say a word about the social and emotional healing many of your students will require. All of them have been touched in some way—sometimes undetectably, sometimes dramatically. Sponsoring mental health assemblies and workshops with some regularity is more than advisable; it is necessary. So is training teachers and other staff in identifying mental health crises among students or colleagues, as well as training them in techniques for boosting team building and morale.

Put a responsive mental health support system in place before school opens. Teachers and all staff should receive professional development on the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological social and emotional issues.

Regardless of what models of training and support are implemented, AFSA recommends ongoing support from social workers, psychologists and other medical professionals, in addition to ongoing professional development and social emotional learning support for all groups.

Redesigning After-School Programs

After-school programs need to be rethought. AFSA recommends that you partner more with local community-based organizations to encourage them to offer more or expanded after-school programs, including sports.

While we understand after-school programs cannot be totally eliminated because parents need somewhere for their children to be safe, the demands of reopening make clear that such programs will need to be very limited.



If after-school programs are maintained, they should be held in the school building, if at all possible, to reduce transportation needs and to prevent students from interacting across locations.

Time-limited physical fitness should be incorporated into regular classes, such as 10 minutes of chair exercises and stretching during first period, thus promoting physical activity during what has become a very sedentary period for both children and adults. Exercises and practices for sports teams probably will have to be reduced; health authorities must authorize noncontact workouts, practices and drills.

In all likelihood, sports competition will not be possible until approved by appropriate state or county authorities based on the incidence of COVID-19 cases. Nonetheless, strict CDC guidelines should be enforced for anybody attending, if and when sporting events are scheduled. The same holds true for such cultural events as plays and concerts.

SUMMING UP:
Embracing the Challenge

This guide outlines a wide range of recommendations for embracing the challenge of reopening schools safely and restoring in-person instruction to the maximum extent possible before a vaccine is available to control COVID-19.

It is a preliminary plan, a snapshot in time, created by school leaders for school leaders, all of whom wish with all their hearts to meet the needs of our nation's children.

AFSA's president has said that schools are the heart of our communities—a place where all can gather to find hope. This is where parents and families go for all kinds of reassurance. This is where children go to seek the path to growth and achievement

Our school leaders have steered the way through the first tumultuous chapter of this crisis, and they will steer us through to the end. When it is over, we and our children will be changed in ways we can't imagine now.

One change we deserve is an enhanced appreciation for the tremendous return society gets on its investment in public schools—and a better understanding of how central public schools are to our families and society.

AFSA already is lobbying Congress and state legislatures more urgently than ever for the additional funding necessary to ensure both the safety and continued learning that the students we serve so desperately need in order to lead us and safeguard our democracy in the future.



We urge you to join us in this effort by demanding the resources your work deserves at every level of government, from your local school board to your state capital, Congress and the White House.

We are here for you. If you need help, have questions or need advice, please contact us on any or all of our communications channels listed on the back cover.

Please stay informed at our website: TheSchoolLeader.org.

Here you will you find resources and school opening plans from organizations, states and communities, which will be updated on a regular basis.

American Federation of School Administrators
AFSA, AFL-CIO

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