A Blueprint for Back to School

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WITH CHRIS CERF, CARRIE CONAWAY, SHARIF EL-MKKI, DALE ERQUIAGA, KAYA HENDERSON, DUNCAN KLUSSMANN, WAYNE LEWIS, PHYLLIS LOCKETT, CANDICE McQUEEN, KAREGA RAUSCH, NINA REES, GERARD ROBINSON, ANDREW ROTHERHAM, IAN ROWE, IRVIN SCOTT, HANNA SKANDERA, DAVID STEINER, JOANNE WEISS, AND JOHN WHITE

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AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE
21 Former Federal, State, and Local Officials

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Dean & Professor of Education, Belmont University; former Kentucky Commissioner of Education
Underlying Assumptions

1. Schools will remain closed this spring but will reopen in the fall (with the potential of localized, 14-to-28-day rolling closures triggered by new outbreaks).

2. Reopened schools will need modifications based on guidance from national, state, and local health officials, which could include physical distancing, temperature screenings, and frequent disinfecting of classrooms.

3. Accommodations will be needed for teachers, administrators, school staff, and students who may be at heightened risk from COVID-19 due to their age or other health conditions.

4. 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.
Guiding Principles

1. While governors have the authority to close and open schools, these decisions are best made by consulting with those closest to the problem, including school leaders, health officials, and community leaders.

2. 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.

3. Schools are obliged to find ways to serve all students, even during times of disruption when remote learning requires students to connect from home.

4. 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.
Anchoring Decisions In Public Health Frameworks

Source: AEI; Johns Hopkins; Harvard; NGA, White House
General Considerations

Community Coordination
- Launch a reopening task force.
- Create a clearinghouse for best practices & lessons learned.
- Prepare for rolling closures (14–28 days) based on public health triggers. Clarify as to who makes determination.
- Develop protocols and partnerships with public health authorities for contact tracing strategies.

Communication
- Comprehensive communication plans to reach teachers and parents leveraging local media, text messaging, websites, and email.

Regulatory Flexibility
- Develop a process and criteria for quickly evaluating requests for regulatory flexibility.
- Schools will also need increased flexibility to procure education materials and resources.

Privacy Protections
- The federal government needs to provide guidance clarifying that federal privacy laws, such as FERPA and HIPAA.
- State policymakers will also need to scrutinize state privacy statutes to identify any potential barriers to this coordination.
- Schools need to review the apps and digital services used for remote learning to ensure they are consistent with privacy protections required under state and federal laws.
School Operations

Public Health Accommodations

- Schools will need to consider closing playgrounds, suspending nonessential activities, limiting on-campus visitors, and requiring temperature checks.
- Classrooms, hallways, school buses, and other areas will need to undergo regular deep cleanings.
- Personal protective equipment for teachers and personnel
- Schools should also develop plans for parents who may decide to keep their child at home during a local outbreak.

School Meals

- Some schools may continue to use buses to distribute meals
- Schools will need to assess whether to serve meals in the classroom or in smaller cohorts in the cafeteria.
- Many schools have become crucial meal distribution sites for not only students but also other community members.

Transportation

- Districts will need to develop contingency plans for the numbers of buses and drivers
- Coordinate with city transportation officials to maximize the use of existing public resources
- Districts also need to plan for the health and safety of drivers and other transportation staff.
Whole Child Supports

SEL Supports

- Schools will need to adopt SEL practices to better support the wide range of student needs.
- Sports and extracurricular activities represent a crucial component of SEL for many students.

Mental Health Supports

- Policymakers and school leaders should assess the need for additional counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses.
- Schools should take advantage of the new federal regulatory flexibility for telemedicine to quickly expand access to counseling services using online and videoconferencing systems.
**School Personnel**

**COVID-19 Susceptible Personnel**

An estimated 18% of teachers (646,000) and 27% of principals are considered vulnerable

- Should consider early retirement incentives
- Should consider expedited credentialing and relaxed class-size requirements
- Reassign teachers who are uncomfortable with online instruction into new roles.

**Percentage of Teachers 55 or Older by State**

- 16% ~10,000

**Collective Bargaining Agreements**

- National unions can provide clear and necessary guidance to their local chapters to help expedite negotiations.
- Governors should bring district leaders and employee representatives together to develop statewide frameworks.

**Teacher Certification Requirements**

- States should make it easier for schools to recruit teachers from across state borders.

**Staffing Challenges**

- Districts and schools should revisit staffing projections with an eye to identifying opportunities for cost-saving measures.
- This is a good time for unions and districts to collaborate on addressing staff health needs, recognizing the fluidity of the situation, and exploring scenarios that are both budget conscious and responsive to teachers’ and students’ needs.
Academics

Continuity of Learning

- School leaders should engage their curriculum providers.
- Schools will need to consider printed resources and materials that students can take home.
- Students with special needs and ELL will need accommodations and additional support.
- We do fire drills, why not remote learning drills?

Schedules and Learning Time

- Schools may need to consider having students attend on alternate days or adopting a half-day mode.
- Schools may need to extend the school day or school year to give students more instructional time.
- Distance learning also provides the opportunity to extend the learning day.
- Opportunity to provide intensive summer school.
- State policymakers might consider providing the flexibility for schools to base student progression on demonstrated mastery of competencies, rather than on seat time.
Assessing Student Needs

- States, districts, and schools should consider screening students to assess their social, emotional, and mental health.
- Might consider working with assessment providers to repurpose the spring assessments into diagnostic assessments for back to school.
- States and districts might also use this as an opportunity to pilot new assessments that provide relevant, actionable diagnostic information to teachers and parents.

Assessments and Accountability

- States should commit now to administering their 2021 assessments in the spring and work with the research community to explore the best methodologies for measuring student growth given the missing year of data.
- States should also consider opportunities to experiment with new assessment and accountability models such as competency-based learning or through course assessments.
- Schools should work with their teachers to determine how best to use assessment and growth data as part of their evaluation frameworks, which for some teachers is crucial for career advancement.
Distance Learning

Home Connectivity

- By the beginning of the school year, all students should have the device and connectivity they need to access learning, particularly among low-income and rural students.
- Schools will need to have devices and mobile hotspots for students to take home in the event of remote learning. Schools will also need to consider ways of providing technical support in remote learning contexts, including providing just-in-time support for teachers.

Professional Development

- Professional development should be tailored to the tools, services, and content districts use.
- Teacher evaluations and improvement strategies (including observation, feedback, and coaching) should consider the need to deliver online instruction and be modified accordingly.
Keys to Planning

**Adaptive:** Create processes that can evaluate and operationalize evolving guidance

**Scenarios:** Plan for different situations such as fully remote learning, partial remote learning, etc.

**Parent and Community Buy-in:** Create feedback mechanisms to bring parents and community members along.

**Experiment:** Test new approaches, technologies, and models. Quebec is doing a “test run” this month.

**Take Care of Yourselves:** Don’t ignore the mental health stress this creates for you, your teachers, and your students.
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