

THE SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS MEANS TRACKING, PREPARATION AND DROWL

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For months, parents and educators have worried about whether or not schools will be able to reopen safely this fall amid the COVID-19 pandemic. State and local officials have struggled to balance competing priorities and answer complicated logistical, educational, and public health questions. For the safety of students, families, and educators, science must drive these decisions.

COVID-19 has left schools in a position no better than when they originally closed in March and April. In fact, with cases approaching 4.9 million, deaths topping 150,000, and rapidly rising infection rates in states across the country, it may well be worse. The coronavirus is now in every state, and many are experiencing rampant case growth.

Science must drive decisions about how and when to reopen schools. This includes both the best science on controlling the spread of COVID-19 and keeping students, families, and school staff safe as well as the science of learning and development for children. Local reopening of schools should be guided by these three key principles.

1. Set an ultimate goal of returning safely to in-person instruction based on public health data

As doctors and educators have said, the goal should be for all students to return safely to in-person instruction. The evidence is clear on its benefits: A recent study found significant negative impacts on student learning associated with switching from a brick-and-mortar school to a virtual school, reinforcing a variety of other research conducted over the past several years. Beyond academics, students gain a host of other educational, social, emotional, and health benefits from being in school with their teachers and peers. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, a lack of in-person instruction and support services "often results in social isolation, making it difficult for schools to identify and address important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation."

2. Make physical reopening decisions based on local health conditions and school-specific information

Decisions on when and how to physically reopen school buildings for in-person instruction must be data-driven, taking into consideration the following factors.

First, the incidence of COVID-19—or the number of reported new cases over a period of time—in the school's surrounding area must be low enough that transmission can be controlled. If schools open with a high incidence of COVID-19 in the community, children and teachers are more likely to carry the virus into schools. And with high rates of community spread, the virus could quickly rage out of control in schools.

Second, districts must consider the size of the student body, the ability to divide students into smaller cohorts, and the physical condition of the school building. If possible, dividing students into smaller classes could help minimize the number of people each student and teacher comes into contact with during a school day. Smaller student bodies as well as larger physical school buildings make it easier to reconfigure classes so that students remain at least six feet apart.

Third, school districts must ensure that there is adequate personal protective equipment for teachers and other employees in the schools. In addition to protective masks, schools should have the resources to place barriers in entrance ways, ensure that there are adequate safeguards in areas where food is prepared, and conduct ongoing deep cleaning. In districts serving high percentages of students from families with low incomes, schools will also need to ensure that all students have access to masks, as mask use must be mandatory in all schools to control the spread of the virus.

Perhaps the most important component of safely reopening schools will be screening students, teachers and guests. [DrOwl](#), a medical platform built on patented technology, has provided a free electronic screening and monitoring tool to Texas schools. Their technology is helping schools throughout the state make their activities safer for staff, students, and guests, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of DrOwl's main features include:

- Screening and tracking of those entering your facility. This creates an electronic log in real-time while sharing a facility-customized message.
- DrOwl also provides on-demand electronic reports that can be run as needed.
- The electronic tracking provides centralized data for epidemiological usage and in cases of infection, the cross-contamination data can be looked at to help schools assess the risks.
- DrOwl is user-friendly, quick, and customizable.
- The desktop and mobile versions can be used from anywhere, at any time.

3. Develop a comprehensive plan for remote learning that includes plans for full-time remote learning and hybrid approaches

Even with the goal of returning safely to in-person instruction, and regardless of the current state of the virus in their community, every district should have a robust, comprehensive plan for remote learning for all students. In localities where in-person instruction is possible, particular students might be unable or unwilling to attend physically before a vaccine is available if they or a family member have preexisting health risks.

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

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Moreover, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, almost 1.5 million teachers—nearly 25 percent of the workforce—are at higher risk from COVID-19 due to age or preexisting conditions. For these educators, returning to physical classrooms could be extremely dangerous, and they may need to teach remotely. The federal government, states, and school districts have a responsibility to protect the health of these teachers through careful planning and risk mitigation strategies.

Despite the near-universal goal of returning students to classrooms this fall, the reality is that school districts cannot simply flip a switch and return to the pre-pandemic school structure. Cases linked to a summer camp and summer school make clear the need to move deliberately and to make sure that, at a minimum, schools can implement social distancing, screening, and other recommended public health measures to reduce spread.

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