A Blueprint for Back to School

What will it take to get schools ready?

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A sign offers advice in dealing with the new coronavirus, outside Littleton High School in Littleton, Colo.

Families and communities need schools to be ready to reopen as soon as public health officials signal it is safe. After all, the nation has recently been reminded just how vital schools really are. Schools connect students with peers and mentors, channel youthful energy into productive pursuits, teach essential academic skills and knowledge, and give overwhelmed parents room to breathe and work.

This makes it urgent that schools find a way to reopen this fall, if at all feasible. Reopening in a manner that is safe and responsive will involve novel challenges. That is why leaders must begin planning immediately. But let us be clear: A number of public health officials—including the habitually cautious Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—have indicated that they expect schools will likely be able to reopen this fall.

What will it take to get schools ready for this fall, amid enormous uncertainty? The path to reopening must be based on the public health frameworks guiding the gradual relaxation of the intensive social distancing measures adopted this spring. Any consideration about reopening must consider the wide variability of circumstances states, communities, and schools confront. Depending on the public health situation, there may be waves of stopping and starting, partial or staggered openings, or other developments (determined by local health facilities, population vulnerability, and more). These decisions will require robust community engagement to yield both coherent planning and community support.

Underlying Assumptions

Education leaders must begin planning now based on the best current understanding of Covid-19 and what is required for continued containment and mitigation. At the same time, this dynamic public health situation requires adaptive planning that can evolve as the science and circumstances do.

Despite the uncertainty, state policymakers, school leaders, and community leaders should develop plans based on the following assumptions informed by the most current guidance from public health officials.

Schools will remain closed for the rest of the 2019–20 academic year but will reopen in the 2020–21 academic year (albeit with the potential of localized, rolling closures for 14–28 days triggered by additional waves of infections).

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.

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.

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

Four principles should guide decisions, preparations, and actions as education leaders, community leaders, and public officials work to reopen our nation's schools. First, 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. Second, schools have a responsibility to meet the continued needs of all students, including the unique needs of students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Third, schools have a responsibility to serve all students, even during times of disruption when remote learning is the primary delivery mechanism requiring students to connect from home to online instruction and resources. Fourth, given that school closures are triggered by government action and that school systems cannot reasonably have been expected to plan for the current situation, state and federal officials have a responsibility to provide the resources schools need to help cover the additional costs of operating during a shutdown or in accord with public health guidance.

The Public Health Framework for Reopening

Governors have used an unprecedented array of social distancing measures to "flatten the curve" and slow the spread of Covid-19. These have included issuing stay-at-home orders, severely restricting travel, restricting the size of gatherings, and closing nonessential services, businesses, and schools.

Flattening the curve provides two benefits: ensuring that hospitals are not overwhelmed and providing time for medical researchers to develop and deploy a vaccine. Given that a Covid-19 vaccine is not expected to be ready for at

least another 18 months, social distancing measures must be relaxed gradually to protect vulnerable populations and prevent a rebound wave of infections.

Schools can only reopen in the context of a community's gradual relaxation of the social distancing measures put in place. In fact, reopening schools is a crucial step in helping reopen other parts of the economy. As such, state and school leaders must develop education plans that are closely tied to their state's public health frameworks, which guide both the gradual relaxation of social distancing measures and the conditions under which those measures should be reactivated. These public health frameworks also outline the important public health accommodations that affect school operations.

Federal Frameworks. Former Food and Drug Administration Commissioners Scott Gottlieb and Mark McClellan and Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security experts released the "National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening." The authors outline a four-phase process, with each phase triggered by set criteria (including a sustained reduction in cases, the capacity of hospitals to safely treat all patients, widespread testing, and active monitoring of confirmed cases and contacts) and provisions for reactivating aggressive social distancing as necessary. The framework envisions schools reopening in the second phase, the stage at which transmission trends are on a sustained decline and health care workers can safely diagnose and treat Covid-19 cases.

Figure 1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Recommendations for School Closure Decisions

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Considerations for School Closures," March 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/considerations-for-school-closure.pdf.

On April 16, the White House released guidance for states as they consider their timelines for reopening. The guidelines roughly follow the road map, outlining three phases of easing social distancing measures based on trends with transmission and hospital capacity (Table 1). This allows for a gradual reopening of parts of the country while maintaining more aggressive social distancing measures in harder-hit areas.

Table 1. White House Phases for Reopening

Phase	Criteria	Reopen	Schools
1	A 14-day period of downward trajectory of documented cases or positive tests as a percentage of total tests Declining rates of flu-like symptoms and hospital capacity to care for all patients	Businesses begin to reopen—telework encouraged Large venues open with physical distancing Minimize nonessential travel	Remain closed Vulnerable populations continue to shelter in place
2	A 28-day period of downward trajectory of documented cases or positive tests as a percentage of total tests Declining rates of flu-like symptoms and hospital capacity to care for all patients	Continued opening of businesses Nonessential travel permitted	Schools open Vulnerable populations continue to shelter in place
3	A 42-day period of downward trajectory of documented cases or positive tests as a percentage over total tests Declining rates of flu-like symptoms and hospital capacity to care for all patients	Businesses and large venues can operate without physical distancing	Schools open

All Schools Regardless of Community Spread

- Confirmed person with COVID-19 in building?
- Assess risk
- Short (potentially two to five days) building dismissal to clean, disinfect, and contact trace in consultation with local health officials

No Community Spread

- Prepare
- Teach and reinforce healthy hygiene
- Develop information sharing systems
- Intensify cleaning and disinfection
- Monitor for absenteeism
- Assess group gatherings and events
- Consider postponing noncritical gatherings and events
- Require sick students and staff to stay at home
- Establish procedures for someone becoming sick at school

Minimal to Moderate Community Spread

- Coordinate with local health officials
- Implement multiple social distancing strategies for gatherings, classrooms, and movement through the building
- Consider ways to accommodate needs of children and families at high risk

Substantial Community Spread

- Coordinate with local health officials
- Implement multiple social distancing strategies for gatherings, classrooms, and movement through the building **with extended school dismissals**
- Consider ways to accommodate needs of children and families at high risk

Source: White House, "Guidelines: Opening Up America Again," April 16, 2020,
https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/#criteria.

State Frameworks. Governors, not federal officials, have the authority and responsibility for enacting and relaxing social distancing measures, including the conditions under which schools should reopen. The National Governors Association released a "[Roadmap to Recovery: A Public Health Guide for Governors](#)" to help governors develop plans for a careful, staged reopening that protects the public's health while laying a strong foundation for long-term economic recovery. The report outlines 10 steps with operational considerations. Governors are also encouraged to create a process for ongoing public input and engagement, including potentially designating an advisory committee.

The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security released a [guide](#) providing more detailed advice for governors in considering each issue. The authors stress that "state-level decision makers will need to make choices based on the individual situations experienced in their states, risk levels, and resource assessments, and they should do so in consultation with community stakeholder groups."

The guide also explains some of the unanswered medical questions that make it difficult for officials to provide firmer guidance around when schools should close and reopen. For example, while initial data suggest that minors generally experience little effects from the virus, it is still largely unknown the rate at which they can spread it to others. More specific guidance will emerge as researchers develop a deeper understanding of the virus.

States are already evaluating this guidance to develop their own phases for reopening their state. Some have appointed task forces, others are considering phasing in reopenings by regions in the state, and some are cooperating with nearby states to develop regional frameworks.

International Lessons. State and school leaders will also benefit from the lessons learned with schools reopening in other countries. Germany will reopen schools on May 4, and students are expected to return to schools on May 11 in France. Danish health officials have reopened schools but with strict hygiene and social distancing rules, including spacing out desks and disinfecting tables, door handles, and other surfaces twice a day. Important insights will be gained from these early attempts to reopen schools that should inform the planning of work underway in the United States.

A Blueprint for Getting Students Back to School

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this work. An immense challenge is determining what public health accommodations and adaptations ought to entail, what schools will require to make them practicable, how community organizations can provide support, and what the path to reopening will look like in practice.

Governors will need to work closely with state school chiefs, state health officials, mayors, local community leaders, superintendents, and unions to develop and implement plans best tailored to their needs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that planning and preparations consider all aspects of a community that might be affected, including populations most vulnerable to Covid-19 and those that may be more affected socially or economically. Strategies must be adaptive and able to be scaled up or down depending on local conditions.

Plans will also need to differentiate strategies based on school levels and student needs. For example, in instances of remote learning, more printed resources might be needed for elementary-age students, while online instruction might work best for high school students. Strategies might also look different for urban schools than rural schools. Differentiation is an important part of any planning process, particularly given the range of students schools serve.

No reasonable observer could have expected school districts to budget for these demands. Even absent the shutdown-induced shocks to state and local budgets, there will be a necessary role here for rapid, substantial federal support. Given the importance of school operations to getting the economy back on its feet, however, such spending can be readily justified.

General Considerations

There are at least four broad considerations when planning for reopening: coordination, communication, regulatory flexibility, and privacy protections. Schools will have to coordinate in new ways with state and local health officials to develop a unified public health strategy. They will need to communicate with stakeholders so that students, families, educators, and community members are clear on expectations for academics and public health. They will need flexibility as they adapt to unprecedented challenges. And we will need to review privacy policies to ensure that schools can engage with students and families in new ways with an eye to both remote learning and community health.

Community Coordination. Reopening will require schools to work far more closely with public health authorities and other agencies than is the norm. This will require new routines and partnerships to allow schools to focus on their core competencies.

At the state level, governors should consider launching a task force for reopening schools that includes legislators, the state chief, teachers, superintendents, representatives from charter schools and private schools, parents, students, union representatives, local or state chambers of commerce, and community leaders. The task force can evaluate ongoing guidance and best practices to develop recommended actions for the state.

States, districts, and schools should create a clearinghouse to share best practices and lessons learned and promote the sharing of resources to help conserve limited budgets.

States, districts, and schools need to develop clear protocols regarding potential rolling closures. Plans for reopening all recognize that there may be need for rolling closures (probably of 14–28 days) if trigger points are breached. It must be clear who will make such a determination and how the decision-making process will work.

Schools must develop protocols and partnerships with public health authorities to effectuate "contact tracing" strategies—with the aim of knowing at any given point which students or teachers warrant special distancing protections or testing. Schools should also prepare for possible reporting of other health indicators, such as student absenteeism, students who present a fever, or students whose parents or guardians have been diagnosed with Covid-19.

Communication. Effective school reopening will require diligent efforts to communicate with parents, educators, and community members. Careful reopening plans will be for naught if parents or educators are not confident about the measures in place. Where schools open with significant modifications to schedules, classes, or logistics, minimizing chaos and confusion will depend on clear and consistent communication.

Schools need comprehensive communication plans to reach teachers and parents that leverage local media outlets, text messaging, websites, and email. Among the most important considerations is the health and safety of students and school personnel. Schools need to provide clear guidance on steps the school is taking, including protocols for self-isolation.

Regulatory Flexibility. The events of this spring showed that many familiar rules and regulations—such as those governing attendance, seat time, instructional delivery, testing, procurement, and graduation requirements—were ill-suited for the challenges schools currently face. Given the likelihood that reopened schools will have to incorporate many novel decisions regarding staffing, scheduling, and operations, there will inevitably be any number of incidents where the usual regulations do not make sense.

State policymakers will need to develop a process and criteria for quickly evaluating requests for regulatory flexibility. Schools will also need increased flexibility to procure education materials and resources. This should likely entail reducing some of the usual paperwork and contractual obligations to get learning materials and other resources in schools for the duration of this current crisis. All this needs to be done on a hugely expedited timeline, so that school and system leaders know what will and will not be allowed this summer as they are planning for fall.

Privacy Protections. Schools will also confront new tensions around student privacy that will need clear guidance from federal and state policymakers. One example is privacy issues that may emerge from increased information sharing among schools, local and state health officials, and health care providers. Schools should also review the privacy policies of their online learning providers.

The federal government needs to provide guidance clarifying that federal privacy laws, such as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, will not prohibit necessary coordination between schools and health officials. 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

Schools will have to revamp their day-to-day operations to adhere to public health guidance. This includes at least three areas of operations: public health accommodations, school meals, and transportation. With public health accommodations, schools will have to examine every aspect of the school day—from classroom spaces to class schedules—and adjust to address new public health guidance. Leaders will need to address gaps in meal service and distribution plans. As for transportation, schools will need to devise plans that conform with physical distancing protocols. All this will have obvious implications for staffing and costs and is a budget line that Washington should help address.

Public Health Accommodations. Schools will need to adapt to evolving guidance from health officials based on a better understanding of Covid-19 risks and the related mitigation strategies. Health officials may recommend reopening schools only when certain hygiene and distancing measures are in place, as we are seeing in parts of Asia and Europe.

Depending on local circumstances, schools will need to consider closing playgrounds, suspending nonessential activities, moving meetings online, limiting on-campus visitors, administering Covid-19 tests, and requiring temperature checks for students and faculty entering buildings. Classrooms, hallways, school buses, and other areas will need to undergo regular deep cleanings to minimize the spread of Covid-19. Schools should identify and procure any needed personal protective equipment public health officials recommend, including gloves, face masks, hand soap, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant. Some of these items will require working with local health authorities, while others may be more widely available but will require unforeseen budgetary outlays. Schools should also develop plans that even if they open schools, some parents may decide to keep their child at home during a local outbreak.

School Meals. State leaders should consider how to leverage the flexibility provided with Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer to provide additional benefits to children who normally receive free or reduced-price school meals. Districts need to assess which students cannot take advantage of school meal distribution sites and identify ways to address these gaps.

Some schools may continue to use buses to distribute meals to students. As students return to school, the burdens this will place on school staff and bus fleets may become prohibitive—requiring alternative strategies. Schools will need to assess whether to serve meals in the classroom or in smaller cohorts in the cafeteria or offer grab-and-go boxed meals. Many schools have become crucial meal distribution sites for not only students but also other community members. Districts need to determine whether to continue this broader meal service option or whether this role is best served by another organization in their community.

Transportation. Schools will have to organize transportation to conform to physical distancing protocols health officials recommend. For instance, it is likely that schools may be advised to operate buses with a one-student-per-seat rule, creating massive burdens for bus fleets and driver pools. There is an additional set of questions regarding transportation for the millions of students in urban centers who typically rely on mass transit.

Districts will need to develop contingency plans that anticipate the required numbers of buses and drivers and the budgetary implications. There will be a clear need for federal funding to help address the unanticipated costs. Districts will need to coordinate with city transportation officials to maximize the use and safety of existing public resources. In urban centers, that will require working with transit and public health officials to determine what is deemed safe and feasible for mass transit.

Districts also need to anticipate issues regarding the health and safety of drivers and other transportation staff. Many drivers may be in a population that is vulnerable to Covid-19 or leery of the risks. Districts need to project what their situation will be for available drivers and plan accordingly.

Whole Child Supports

Schools need to consider students' social and emotional (SEL) needs. Students are experiencing Covid-19 differently. Many are going through significant trauma because of school closures, potentially losing friends and family members and experiencing the insecurity created from parents losing jobs. SEL and trauma supports will be crucial not only during this period of remote learning but also in the next academic years. It is also important, however, to avoid stereotypes or stigmas and assess students as individuals with targeted support accordingly.

SEL Supports. All students need supportive relationships and nurturing learning environments, particularly students facing additional stress. Educating the "whole child" is not a single set of courses, policies, or activities, but rather a mindset that should inform both school reopening plans and the support students receive. Schools should consider a needs assessment to understand the full range of student and faculty needs. Meeting those needs is not the school's sole responsibility, but rather a shared responsibility among community partners including community health providers, food banks, counseling, and other resource providers.

Schools will need to adopt SEL practices to better support the wide range of student needs. In particular, this means working with national organizations to provide the expertise and support for schools and systems to do this well. Sports and extracurricular activities represent a crucial component of SEL for many students, and there are questions about when these activities can be responsibly resumed. There is a crucial role for private organizations such as state athletic associations, the National Honors Society, debate and forensics leagues, and similar organizations to work with states to determine appropriate timelines and explore possible accommodations that might promote an expedited restart.

Mental Health Supports. The isolation brought about by social distancing can exacerbate children's depression and anxiety. As students return, schools must have counseling support to address the numerous causes of trauma that result from the deaths of friends and family members, economic hardship from a parent losing his or her job, or abuse, violence, or neglect. The isolation brought about by social distancing can also exasperate children's depression and anxiety.

Policymakers and school leaders should assess the need for additional counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses. They should explore whether there are better opportunities to deploy staff, temporarily draw support from community organizations, partner with other community-based organizations, or sketch extraordinary 2021 funding demands for state and federal appropriators. 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

Many educators may be vulnerable to Covid-19, raising questions about how to protect them, whether they will be able to work in schools next year, and how to respond to any resultant personnel shortages. Meanwhile, districts and teachers unions should work together to revisit aspects of their labor agreements to help schools adapt to social distancing and to ensure that vulnerable teachers can work safely and productively. As school budgets, responsibilities, and models evolve, schools and districts must be prepared to evaluate their staffing needs.

Covid-19 Susceptible Personnel. With vulnerable personnel, those over age 55 are the most at risk from Covid-19. This would suggest that an estimated 18 percent of teachers and 27 percent of principals are considered vulnerable. States should explore possibilities to offer early retirement or reassign at-risk staff.

States and schools should consider early retirement incentives that align with individuals susceptible to Covid-19 based on age and adjust years of service requirements for retiree health insurance. States should also consider how expedited credentialing, nontraditional classroom configurations, and relaxed class-size requirements might help address potential staffing shortages due to the many teachers currently at risk who might not be able to enter classrooms this fall. States and schools should also explore reassigning teachers who are uncomfortable dealing with the new teaching practices required, including online instruction.

Teacher Certification Requirements. If vulnerable teachers cannot come to school to teach, schools will need to find other teachers who can quickly step in. Two workable strategies are to relax interstate licensure requirements and expedite certification for teachers whose training was interrupted this spring.

States should make it easier for schools to recruit teachers from across state borders. This strategy was employed by several states with health professionals to help surge capacity at hospitals. States should start immediately to appropriately revise their reciprocity requirements for teachers with out-of-state certifications.

States should consider taking a page from how many of them handled medical students late in their training, issuing would-be graduates in good standing with expedited or provisional credentials. This would allow districts to hire these individuals if needed. Meanwhile, states can require individuals to pursue full certification and can revoke provisional certifications where appropriate.

Collective Bargaining Agreements. Whatever one thinks of collective bargaining agreements in ordinary circumstances, contractual constraints on class sizes, schedules, staff work hours, and more could make it difficult for schools to adapt in response to social distancing requirements—compromising their ability to educate students and potentially putting vulnerable educators' lives at risk.

National unions can provide clear and necessary guidance to their local chapters to help expedite negotiations. Obviously, it might be problematic for unions to contemplate waiving some contractual language for the coming school year. On the other hand, part of the agreement should be creating off-contract roles and duties (such as remote educator or homework coach) that would allow districts to create appropriate roles for at-risk staff.

Governors would do well to bring district leaders and employee representatives together to develop statewide frameworks for creating flexibility around staffing and labor issues. Given the urgency, such conversations should be well underway by mid-June. Changes ought not necessarily involve expanded or reduced total work hours or requirements, but they would likely involve heightened flexibility for the 2020–21 academic year.

Staffing Challenges. As budgets, responsibilities, and models evolve over the next 18 months, schools and districts must be prepared to evaluate their staffing needs. Districts and schools are currently wrestling with chaotic budget projections, uncertainty with operations, and questions about how they will be using staff in 2020–21. This suggests a need to start planning now for possible changes in staffing that could include early retirements or reassignments. Leaders need to plan for adding staff in certain roles (such as janitorial services or remote learning), while there may need to be reductions in other positions. Certainly, the dire budget projections suggest that all schools and systems should be planning for potential layoffs, reduced hours, or other cost-saving adjustments.

Districts and schools should revisit staffing projections with an eye to identifying opportunities for cost-saving measures, such as early retirement, depending on what happens in the budget. Some early retirements for staff susceptible to Covid-19 might also be part of this estimate.

Given that about 80 percent of school outlays are for compensation for staff, it will be essential for cash-strapped districts to explore all avenues of relief—which includes the potential for new federal and state aid—and 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. Given the need to rethink certain staffing and jobs, it makes this a particularly opportune time for philanthropy to partner with select teachers unions and districts to reflect budget-conscious models.

Academics

Disrupting the school year has created broad academic challenges for students, particularly those most vulnerable before the crisis occurred. Schools will need to differentiate instructional strategies to meet students where they are. This means addressing schedules and instructional time, diagnostics, curriculum, and accountability. Schools should prepare for possible intermittent closures next year and plan for continuity of learning. States will need to consider potential assessment challenges, including the implications for traditional accountability measures.

Continuity of Learning. If another wave of Covid-19 sweeps through a community, schools may once again be closed and have to return to remote learning. Schools will need to support teachers with managing class assignments, content, and assessments delivered remotely. This will include providing backup support for teachers who are themselves caring for kids or elderly parents or who are sick themselves and cannot be as attentive to their jobs as others can.

School leaders should engage their curriculum providers to identify the best way to use the publisher's material to identify student learning gaps, how their materials can be used in different ways (e.g., in-classroom instruction, remote learning, and hybrid learning), and how the provider can help give professional development for teachers in each modality. Schools will need to consider printed resources and materials that students can take home.

Students with special needs and English language learners will need accommodations and additional support. Those must be planned for now to ensure every student can be served in the event of additional closures. And teachers must receive needed professional development to ensure they can carry out these responsibilities. Schools routinely employ drills to test procedures for fires, tornadoes, and active shooters; a similar approach should be considered to test remote learning systems and procedures before they are needed.

Schedules and Learning Time. Based on preliminary health guidance, schools will not be able to reopen in ways that fill classrooms with students or create crowded hallways. Instead, districts will need to take into account how schedules affect the types of personal interactions that occur daily—whether in classroom seating or passing through hallways—and redesign them so students and staff can meet health protocols.

Schools may need to consider having students attend on alternate days or adopting a half-day model in which half the students attend in the morning and half in the afternoon. 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 with both in-classroom work and at-home learning.

In some cases, summer is an opportunity to provide intensive summer school. In others, community partners may provide enrichment activities for students while districts focus on their planning, preparations, and professional development for back to 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. Schools would be opening this fall after most students were out of a brick-and-mortar school for more than five months. The first priority will be getting students reintegrated into school. Districts and schools need to consider the variety of diagnostics assessments that can be used for understanding where each student is academically and each child's SEL needs. They will need to identify the most vulnerable students (homeless students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students directly affected by Covid-19 through a family death or hospitalization) to prioritize their needs.

States, districts, and schools should consider screening students to assess their social, emotional, and mental health after such a prolonged period of isolation. States and districts might consider working with their 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. The loss of the 2020 spring assessments severely curtails our understanding of student progress and needs, particularly across different student groups including race, gender, poverty, English language ability, and special needs. Assessment data are also crucial for informing school interventions, improving instructional practices, and targeting resources to the schools and students who need the most help.

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. They 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. States should determine what constitutes attendance and a statutory school day in the context of remote learning and begin to assess how possibly reducing the total number of in-person class days or instructional hours might change how assessments are used in the schoolhouse. As accountability in many states and districts now includes attendance, state and district leaders will need to determine if adjustments in attendance policies should be made during the period transitioning back to school.

Distance Learning

Technology is a lousy substitute for an engaged classroom teacher, but it can support instruction—and remote learning can be a lot better than nothing at all. The sudden shift to remote learning in the spring revealed the stark challenges students faced if they could not connect to the online content or video conferences with their teachers. The coming months provide an opportunity to assess what worked and did not work with remote learning, address home connectivity gaps, and provide teachers the training they need to succeed next year.

Home Connectivity. Regarding home connectivity, remote learning works only if students can access the content and instruction. A series of measures are necessary to ensure that students can learn remotely if schools employ a "hybrid" (part in-school, part at-home) model or have to transition back to complete distance learning at any point next year. 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 hot spots 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. This spring, millions of teachers who have never taught remotely have been suddenly forced into duty as online educators. States and districts need to devise strategies to dramatically improve the quantity and quality of online teaching if it proves necessary, either as part of a hybrid delivery model or during rolling closures next fall.

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.

The Path Forward

This report provides an initial outline of the broad issues leaders will need to consider as they plan for reopening schools. Guidance will evolve as we learn more about Covid-19, lessons from other countries that reopen their schools, and the lived experience of children and teachers. As of the publishing of this report, there are only five months until the beginning of the 2020–21 school year. Leaders will need to make the most of those months to be prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

Given that most schools will remain closed for the remainder of the academic year, school leaders will need to focus on reviewing and improving the emergency measures they have taken. To inform future efforts, remote learning and meal

distribution systems can be assessed to identify what did and did not work. This is the time to conduct school and community needs assessments to identify gaps and provide the baseline for planning efforts.

The summer offers the chance to not only prepare for the coming school year, with intensive professional development for teachers and a more holistic review of curriculum and instructional resources, but also "super charge" various interventions that can help mitigate the expected learning loss students may face.

Back to school presents its own challenges and uncertainties with everything from sporting events to academics. Leaders must embrace the uncertainty and prepare plans for the contingencies that may be needed if school is disrupted due to school closures or other accommodations required by public health officials. It will not be acceptable for schools to say that because they could not provide education to all students, they cannot serve any student. These five months give schools the chance to prepare the plans for serving students with special needs and those for whom online instruction is not an option.

Most importantly, the planning for reopening schools creates the opportunity to renew a shared commitment to improving outcomes for all students. We should not try to return to "normal," but rather strive for something better. Even when schools were operating normally before Covid-19, many students were not being served well. Covid-19 exposed too many of the inequities that we have either overlooked or ignored for too long. Rising up to meet this challenge requires the whole community, not just school leaders.

Adapting to the challenges of Covid-19 gives America's schools the opportunity to provide what is uniquely possible in the schoolhouse while seeking new ways to fully use technology and community partnerships. We understand the enormity of these burdens. This is a moment when all of us—educators, families, and communities—must find ways to ensure that children get back the schools and connections so important to their young lives. When schools get the green light to go, they must be ready. That work starts now.

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