

Key Re-Opening Considerations

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May 8, 2020

As schools begin to create their plans around return to school, they are often looking at specific operational areas. The questions below are excerpted from the longer [SAIS publication](#) addressing mapping a return to campus. Many schools often find it helpful to have teams working on these sections, either as presented or as is appropriate for your school. Before the teams begin their work, it can also be helpful to have a sense of the school's priorities overall, or at least within these areas, as well as some of the facts as the school knows them at the time.

These questions are by no means a complete list of what schools should be considering as they work through their plans to return to campus. They are a jumping off point as schools begin their work. Some of the questions may not apply to all schools, and there are likely more questions or areas that schools will want to consider.

Health and Safety

Schools often strive to provide safe environments for their students and in no time is that focus more relevant than it is right now. Schools should be focused on understanding both the requirements being put in place by federal, state, and local laws, but also be thinking through smart ways to implement those requirements in such a way that they meld into the school's culture and the family experience as much as possible. Schools confronted with a variety of recommendations should generally choose the one that is most restrictive. This is also true with the safety protocols the school puts in place across all programming. There should be no exceptions to safety requirements without documentation that shows the variation is appropriate and safe for the circumstances.

- What are the relevant federal, state, and local agencies providing guidance or making decisions on behalf of the school? Who on staff are monitoring those agencies?
- What new policies and practices need to be implemented?
- What policies need to be updated now?
- What communications do we need to have ready?
- What standard operating protocols do we need in place for temperature reading, quarantining, social distancing, etc.?
- What mental health supports and structures do we currently have? Where do we need more?
- What are other schools that are already managing a return to school doing?

- What relevant state or local pandemic guides should we track? (See this [example](#) from Nashville.)
- What safety materials such as masks, sanitizer, soap, etc., do we need to supply and what should students and staff bring with them? How will we acquire these?
- How will testing for COVID-19 and antibodies work in our area?
- How will results affect our systems?
- If someone within our community tests positive for COVID-19, what is our overall operational response? Who is tracking for updates and changes in this area?
- What new agreements, waivers, and education should be provided to parents, students, and staff about the new operating protocols for the school moving forward?

School Operations

For most schools, this is the most complex part of the planning scenarios. Schools are reconciling what are designed to be relationship-based, collaborative, creative, warm and welcoming experiences that encourage friendships and casual connections with requirements that keep everyone six feet apart. This particular area requires an eye for detail and a review of every aspect of school life from carpool, to meals, to class changes, to going to the bathroom.

- From beginning to end, what would a student schedule look like if we were to maintain social distancing at all times?
- What tools can we use to do the best we can to maintain that social distancing at all grade levels?
- How do we use these [risk management controls](#) from Johns Hopkins to manage safely delivering education?
- How do we manage the absence from campus of vulnerable staff and students? What percentage of our community do these groups represent?
- What options work best for our campus and community if only half of the community can be on the campus at any given time?
- What would various levels of restriction on campus access look like? (Consider all visitors, including vendors, volunteers, parents, tour groups, etc.)
- What would standard community events and gatherings look like online?
- How would we manage delivery of meals?

Facilities

The virus can live on different surfaces for varying amounts of times and high touch locations are where it loves to catch a ride. Schools, with their light switches, door handles, banisters, gym equipment, bathroom handles, cafeterias, and plethora of other surfaces that students, staff, and visitors brush daily provide innumerable opportunities for the virus to take hold. Schools will need to follow new disinfecting protocols, but also should consider how to reduce high touch locations through motion sensors and the like. Schools will also want to carefully study parts of the campus where there should be limited use or access depending on the state of the outbreak.

- What new disinfecting and other cleaning steps must we follow?
- How do we secure supplies and gain the expertise to follow best practice?
- How can we document these steps reliably?

- How do we ensure that students are not using facilities or parts of campus where they should not be at this time?
- What training protocols do we need for staff on new safety and security methods?
- Where do staff need additional help in following new protocols?
- Building and facilities updates / additions – what physical state will they be in in the fall?
- What changes can we make to facilities to limit high touch areas (automatically opening doors, kickplate doors, etc.)
- What additional sinks and sanitizing stations needs to be added?

Teaching and Learning

The coronavirus has caused many schools to pause and truly think about the focus of learning when on and off campus, particularly in light of the additional strain families and staff are confronting given the magnitude of the pandemic. This requires more focus on how smoothly communities can transition from in-person to remote learning, and how smoothly they can create blended environments. This is particularly important given that many schools anticipate a period during which not all students may be on campus at any given time. This new mode will require lesson plans and the entire educational experience to work for both students and staff physically present and those working from home. Schools are also aware that this spring was an experiment in emergency remote learning, while this fall and the academic year ahead will need to be a more comprehensive approach to a different kind of learning experience, particularly if schools expect to continue to charge regular tuition pricing.

Further, schools will need to ensure that staff members are not over-taxed as they continue working in these unprecedented and novel times. Finally, schools should be regularly reflecting on what they have learned about their students during this time as well as what new opportunities there are for shifting pedagogy or delivering services through different means, potentially to an expanding base of students.

- What are our objectives for learning during remote learning?
- How will we assess where students are when we return to school in the fall?
- How do teachers understand and use the different strengths behind in-person learning and remote learning?
- What adjustments will be needed to curriculum at the beginning of the school year to ensure that students have sufficient skills to move forward?
- What support are we providing to teaching staff as they plan for bimodal education delivery?
- What did we see in our students during remote learning that we want to strengthen for the future? (e.g., if students lack agency over their learning, growing that strength)
- What shifts must we make in pedagogy when shifting to remote learning?
- How do students and parents understand the changes and differences between the two modes of learning?
- How do we make remote learning and on-campus learning more seamless in a blended model?
- What technology improvements or upgrades are needed to continue learning both on and off campus?

- What additional training to staff, students, and parents need on new devices or tools?
- Does the school’s current technology infrastructure support the vision of the teaching and learning ahead?
- What opportunities are there for the school in new markets or delivery to new types of students?
- How does what we learned in remote learning help us think about how we use time on campus and in class?

Community

Far and away, the question of maintaining and growing community is among the top concerns for all independent schools. Parents, students, staff, and alums all look to the school to provide a community nexus and support structure. For students in particular, the school community provides an opportunity to engage with activities, sports, student leadership, creative outlets, and more. How can schools continue to embrace and grow community while on and off campus and maintaining social distancing?

- How are we maintaining our community through these varying modes?
- What opportunities are there to engage parents in ways we have not before?
- What student activities are available to continue to foster student culture and community? (e.g., everything from student clubs, to year book, to the school newspaper, and beyond)
- What does the communications calendar look like for our school in our various operational modes? In each case, who is doing the communicating with which audiences?
- What sample communications should we have in place before the start of the year?
- How should we be talking about giving, admissions, financial aid, vulnerability, and equity now?
- What systems do we use to ensure that all school communications reflect agility, flexibility, compassion, and care?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Many schools are taking a “DEI” lens to all of the decisions they are making to ensure that they are not inadvertently affecting or excluding underrepresented or vulnerable parts of their school community. Never has this priority been more important in how a school thinks about its work and decisions.

- How do our decisions, processes, and vision for operations during this time potentially impact the most vulnerable people in our community?
- How do we make sure that the school priority around diversity, equity, and inclusion is fully present in our new mode?
- Where are there are opportunities to raise awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our teaching and learning now?
- How are we meeting the needs of diverse learners?
- Are there implicit assumptions built into the systems we are building that are not reflective of the needs of our families or staff?
- Are we managing any additional expenses of additional technology or other needs for families or staff that might find them difficult to bear?

- How does our adjusted school day address concerns for students or families who rely on the school for childcare or other school support systems?
- How are our virtual admissions systems designed to reach diverse families of all kinds?

Wellness

Before the pandemic, wellness in the United States was already an important topic garnering a lot of attention. Since the onset of the pandemic, the issue has become even more vital as individuals cope with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and other mental health struggles in a very trying time. Further, for some families and staff, quarantines and stay at home orders have required them to live in an abusive or otherwise exacerbating environment without an outlet. Finally, schools are asking staff to maintain their professional roles while managing their domestic lives simultaneously, a Herculean task. Wellness speaks both to community and the heart of a school's empathy.

- *Student Support*
 - How do our current student support structures need to shift to support students better during this time?
 - What new structures might we implement?
 - How do we know how are students are doing?
 - What resources (human or otherwise) or systems are we providing to teachers to identify students of concern or to further support students outside the classroom?
 - How does our daily schedule reflect student support?
 - How do our learning and teaching outcomes reflect the outcomes we seek for student wellness?
 - What are we doing to maintain student community when in wholly remote or partially remote scenarios?
 - Is there any support that should be provided to alumni right now, particularly to recent graduates?
- *Parent Support*
 - How do we maintain the school community without on-campus events?
 - How are we supporting parent understanding of school objectives during off-campus learning?
 - How are we keeping parents engaged?
 - How do help calm parent anxieties about their students? (Identify developmental milestones/topics: college process, learning loss, social emotional learning, socialization, extracurriculars, etc.)
- *Staff Support*
 - How are we supporting the wellness of our staff?
 - How are we maintaining staff confidence in the school direction?
 - How are we supporting staff needs appropriately?
 - What systems do we have in place to allow staff to work with the school about concerns?
 - How are we using the staff we have available to fill new roles and needs?

Arts

The arts play a key part in the lives of many campuses. They provide a way for students to explore, express, and grow to often awe-inspiring outcomes. Indeed, in time many schools have developed extremely advanced art programs and facilities. The challenge during this time is that the arts often bring students in very close range of each other as they perform. Indeed, there have been some well-documented studies of the virus passing between choir members. Schools are looking for opportunities to provide students with the outlets the arts provide while minimizing the potential for contagion.

- Which arts organizations, state, or local public health officials are providing guidelines or insights into safe practices in choirs, a cappella groups, and theater?
- Which plays or other performances provide opportunities for students to engage in the performing arts while maintaining healthy social distancing?
- What changes will need to be made to the performing arts programs or spaces to ensure that the minimum distances are maintained between students, and between students and teachers? (including smaller group or private lessons for musicians)
- What art studio activities or spaces need to be reconsidered in light of social distancing?
- What supplies used in the arts will need to be re-ordered or maintained as personal supplies?
- What additional testing may be needed for performing artists during rehearsal and performing times?
- What other ways can we ensure that students are getting to explore and maintain the arts during this time? How can technology play a part in this effort?

Athletics

For many adults and students, athletics are a fundamental part of education. They teach teamwork, mastery, dedication, leadership, and perseverance among so many other important skills and traits. And yet, so many athletics require close quarters between athletes. Add in travel, locker rooms, and overnight trips and there are many challenges ahead for athletics this fall. Schools are often looking at ways they can capture the benefits of athletics in modified programs going into the fall, with the long-term hope that students will be able to play on some level at potentially other times of year.

- With which organizations should we be working to ensure that our athletic operations are meeting current safety guidelines?
- What kinds of athletics might be “safe” with social distancing?
- How will this impact our physical education curriculum?
- How soon might we reasonably see a return of competitive athletics?
- How will this impact our students? What supports might they need in light of this loss?
- How might we fill any void left by the temporary loss of athletics?
- How do we meet the exercise needs of students in a social distancing context?
- What other ways might we use our athletic facilities in the meantime?
- What forms do we need for students to participate in sports on and off campus?
- What do safe numbers look like within the athletic areas?
- What additional testing is needed for athletes?
- What are safe circumstances for spectators?

- Six feet is not a safe distance for active athletes. Some experts say 12 feet should be the norm in fitness rooms and during other workouts. How will that affect ongoing sports on campus?
- What cleaning and disinfecting protocols will need to be in place for athletics facilities?

Financials

If community is the heart of the school, the financials are what help keep the blood pressure of the school stable. Right now, it is important to have a firm grasp on the school's dashboards to understand how enrollment, financial aid needs, changes to auxiliary income, and new delivery modes are all potentially impacting the school's overall financial viability. Schools should be thinking about what is possible in the short-term for financial short-falls or other bumps in the road while envisioning what is possible with new approaches and modules for the long-term.

- What standard budget models do we have now (there should be at least three)?
- What changes need to be made for each of the budget models? What are the school's priorities when making those decisions?
- Will the school be charging full tuition for online learning? If not, what does that model look like and how is the school budgeting for that change?
- How much of a shortfall can the school manage in the short-term?
- What other auxiliary revenue models or streams should the school consider in light of the success or interest in online learning?
- What impact will the change to auxiliary programs (summer camps, athletic events, etc.) have on the school's overall budget?
- What financial models should the school consider to reduce the cost of online learning?
- Does your investment policy need to be reviewed and updated?
- If extended tuition payments, will your cash flow be adequate to cover expenses?
- Do you accept credit cards for payment?
- Are you ok losing your summer revenue? Can you do community events during the fall on weekends that will cover some of the loss?
- Schools with current loans outstanding:
 - What are the payback obligations?
 - Can loan payments be delayed?
 - Are there any terms within loans or bonds that will limit the school's flexibility in using its endowment or other resources right now?
- Is now the time to take on short term debt?
- Will current vendors extend credit or lower payments for supplies, food, etc.?
- Are we taking advantage of consortium purchasing?
- Does your board need to change / add expertise in any field immediately?
- If federal financial assistance has been received, what policies, procedures, and trainings must be adopted?
- *Human Resources*
 - What employment related policies need to be updated now?
 - Are there any changes to employment agreements that must be made?
 - What additional training will be required as we return to campus?

- How would we carry out a reduction in force if needed? What is the paradigm for doing that?
- *Enrollment management*
 - How must enrollment management change to bring more families into the school from a distance?
 - What is our philosophy around financial aid for families during this window?
 - How are we ensuring a diverse candidate pool while we are in our virtual mode?
 - What opportunities are there to leverage the success we have had moving students to remote learning?
- *Advancement*
 - How will the school's considerations of philanthropy change during this window?
 - What are the short and long-term development goals for the school's advancement work?
 - What new and different ways can the school engage alumni?
 - What new and different ways can the school engage in community fundraising events?
 - Where should fundraising be focused? (financial aid, endowment, staff salaries and support, etc.)