

Education Week

How CDC Guidance Could Shape What Back-to-School Looks Like in the COVID-19 Era

By **Evie Blad**

May 29, 2020

Video on CDC Guidelines: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/05/29/how-cdc-guidance-could-shape-what-back-to-school.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-mostpop&M=59587894&U=1403739&UUID=8595608caf5abeca6a87b78188e1bcf4>

Face masks would become common, cafeterias would be closed to prevent crowding, and extracurricular activities would be cancelled in areas heavily affected by the coronavirus if schools adhere to long-awaited guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on reopening schools.

The guidance includes voluntary recommendations that could alter nearly every part of the school day, from bus rides to recess. And adhering to it could present major challenges to educators returning to shuttered school buildings after a long period of remote learning.

After the agency quietly posted the document May 16, administrators rushed to review it and consider if they could apply it in their schools. Partially inaccurate summaries spread quickly on social media, stirring reaction from concerned parents, many of whom were getting their first detailed look at how their children's schools may change when they reopen.

The guidance comes as states and districts begin planning for the 2020-21 school year, most of them considering multiple scenarios—remote learning, in-person instruction, or a hybrid approach—that could be adapted depending on how well their regions keep the virus contained over the summer.

"I don't think the public was as aware of how complicated the decisionmaking is," said Jeanné Collins, superintendent of Vermont's Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, a rural school system with about 1,500 students.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released voluntary guidance for reopening schools after extended closures due to the coronavirus. Among the recommendations:

- *Face coverings should be worn by staff in all steps of reopening, and students, particularly older students, should be encouraged to wear fabric face masks. Masks should be worn "where feasible," particularly in situations where physical distancing is difficult.*
- *Schools should increase ventilation with outside air, unless it creates concerns for students with asthma.*
- *Schools should ensure water fountains are safe to use after prolonged shutdowns.*
- *Students should be kept in small class cohorts throughout the day to limit possible transmission of the virus between groups.*
- *Schools should turn all student desks to face the same direction and space them six feet apart if possible.*

- *Common areas, such as cafeterias, should be closed, and students should eat in their classrooms.*
- *Schools should provide enough "high touch" objects, like art supplies and electronics, so that students don't have to share and items can be disinfected between uses.*
- *Schools should conduct daily health checks of staff and students, and isolate individuals if they feel unwell during the school day.*
- *Administrators should provide options for telework and virtual learning for students and staff who are at higher risk for severe illness.*
- *Administrators should close schools for one or two days to clean and sanitize when a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19.*

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The CDC cautioned that the recommendations should be applied in a way that is "feasible, practical, acceptable, and tailored to the needs of each community." And it's just one factor leaders will consider, alongside issues like advice from state health authorities and the severity of spread in their areas.

Deciding When to Open

Public health officials have said schools will be able to open in regions that have seen declining rates of the virus and are prepared to aggressively monitor and contain new cases through testing and contact tracing. But, until there is a vaccine or an effective treatment, schools will have to modify operations to keep students and staff healthy and to prevent asymptomatic spread in their communities.

Among the recommendations in the document: Schools should keep students in small cohorts, even shutting down cafeterias and having kids eat in classrooms to reduce interactions with other groups. And students should sit every other row on school buses to avoid crowding.

Those changes will be difficult for schools that are facing a multi-pronged challenge of catching students up after inconsistent access to remote education, implementing new health protocols, and adjusting to potentially draconian state budget cuts resulting from a cratered economy.

The CDC recommendations come after education groups complained that federal agencies had not provided enough clarity about how to safely operate schools during the pandemic.

"These were the kind of specific guidelines that we were looking for," said Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

The recommendations largely match an earlier draft that had been leaked to the Associated Press and reportedly shelved by the White House. Some superintendents had already consulted that draft as they considered hundreds of questions about reopening, Domenech said.

For example, the previous draft and the new document both call for desks to be spaced six feet apart if possible and to face in the same direction.

"It raises the reality of how different schools will have to look when they do reopen this fall," Domenech said. "Right off the get go, when you consider the social spacing guidelines, that right there implies that a school won't be able to admit the usual number of students."

That's why most schools are anticipating teaching with a hybrid approach that allows some students to continue remote learning or rotates groups of students for attendance on alternating days, he said.

Collins said she anticipates taking a hybrid approach. She's been surveying parents and staff about their concerns and fears so that she can incorporate them into her planning and address them in her communications.

Since her district closed buildings in mid-March, Collins has sent twice-weekly emails to parents to update them on the kinds of changes their children may see when they go back to school.

"I've been preparing them without scaring them, I hope," she said.

Parents, Teachers Remain Wary

Polling suggests the public is wary of returning children to schools, and the dramatic changes they may see in their classrooms.

Fifty-nine percent of parent respondents to a May 26 USA Today/Ipsos poll said that, if their child's school were to reopen and implement social distancing guidelines, they would be "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to pursue at-home learning, like home school or online education. About 7 in 10 said they would likely ask their child to wear a mask at school, and about the same number said it was likely their child would struggle with social distancing at school.

In the poll of K-12 teachers, 18 percent said it would be "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that they would not return to teaching if their schools reopened with social distancing guidelines. That includes a quarter of respondents over age 55.

The CDC guidelines urge that schools in areas with significant spread of the virus should remain closed. It cautions that schools should make accommodations for students and staff who may be more vulnerable to severe illness. If possible, schools should screen students for symptoms like fevers, it says, and they should isolate students who become ill during the school day.

The proposal sparked strong reactions from educators, who said some of the changes may make it difficult to teach their students and to keep them engaged.

Rickey Koga, a 2nd grade teacher in Oxnard, Calif., said wearing a face mask would make it difficult for his students to watch his mouth movements while he helps them sound out words, which is key to literacy instruction. The guidance says that staff should wear masks and that older students should be encouraged to wear them where feasible, especially when social distancing is impractical. It acknowledges that younger children may struggle to wear them for extended periods.

"The connection between teachers and students has a lot to do with my facial expressions, and students key into that a lot," he said. "If I'm smiling behind a mask, students won't necessarily see that."

Koga said he wants his school's operations to be guided by science and the cautions of public health officials. But he warned that some recommendations may not be feasible, especially for young students.

"There seems to be some sort of disconnect between teachers' reality in our classrooms with our students versus the policies created by the government," Koga said.

For Sally Wice, an 8th grade English teacher in Roanoke, Va., the CDC recommendation that stood out most was a call to limit shared supplies in classrooms to reduce the spread of germs between students.

Wice estimated she spent about \$750 out of her own pocket to buy materials like markers for her classroom this year, a cost that will grow if students can't share them.

When she read the document, "I showed dollar signs in my eyes," Wice said.

But no one can predict what will happen in the next month, let alone the coming school year, the educators said. They've encouraged their colleagues to wait for more direction from state and local leaders before imagining their new teaching environments.

"I think it's OK to put the brakes on for a minute," Wice said. "We don't know what it's going to look like. If I try to plan and stress myself, I will drive myself crazy."