

Education Week

School Reopening Plans Could Worsen Inequities. That's Why This Panel Prioritizes Some In-Person Classes

By Sarah D. Sparks on July 15, 2020 10:51 AM



School leaders who gloss over equity issues when planning to reopen schools this fall will not only exacerbate learning losses caused by this spring's coronavirus closures, but could worsen the effects of the pandemic in some of the communities already hardest hit.

That is the bottom line for [new guidance on school reopening](#) out today from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, the collective formal scientific body of the United States. While the guidance shares recent reopening [recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics](#) on the importance of social distancing and hygiene in reducing the risk of pandemic outbreaks in opening schools, it stresses that the pandemic has already worsened disadvantages for Black, Latino, and Native American children—the three groups with the highest rates of COVID-19 after accounting for demographic age differences—and schools must take these into account when deciding how to prioritize allotting their rapidly shrinking resources.

"Because equity is a chief challenge that many school districts face, then it needs to be a chief priority as we think about reopening schools," said Keisha Scarlett, a member of the National Academies committee that developed the guidelines and chief of equity partnerships and engagement for Seattle public schools. "The families and communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 virus are Black and indigenous and Latinx communities, and it just exacerbates existing disparities. ... School systems should not let there be barriers for these families to be able to participate, whether it's schools purchasing masks for students to be able

to be in school, helping to support them with technology or resources for the in-person or out-of-school learning that has to happen. But another part about equitable access is also access to decision-making and making sure they have a seat at the table—because the families most impacted are the ones who have the most at stake in equitable schools."



While the vast majority of schools **used at least some online learning** during this spring's closures, experts say lack of technological access and support severely limited some students' access to instruction, and the National Academies argued that distance learning had not been proven developmentally appropriate for students in K-5. In contrast to **many districts' rapidly emerging plans for hybrid learning schedules come fall**, the National Academies urged schools to prioritize full-time, in-person instruction for all students in K-5, as well as **those with disabilities**, and other needs that would make distance learning more difficult to access.

The National Academy authors argue there hasn't been enough research to know for certain **how likely children are to catch and spread the coronavirus**. At least one recent case study has suggested **older adolescents can catch the disease from their teachers** in close contact, but there have been no U.S. outbreaks studied among schoolchildren, and "so long as the COVID-19 pandemic persists, there cannot be 100 percent safety in reopening schools for in-person learning. Given this, school systems and their surrounding communities will have to weigh the risks and uncertainties of reopening for in-person learning against the educational and social risks and challenges associated with continuing to educate and support students using a distanced model."

With evidence and best practices changing so rapidly, the best school leaders can do, the report argues, is to keep close contact with health authorities and work to mitigate health risks as they learn about them, while working to prevent the better-known damage to students' academic and social-emotional development. It highlighted Austin's system for using community infection risk to inform opening decisions. The framework allows school leaders, parents, teachers, business leaders, or other stakeholders to lay out specific goals and priorities, then weigh them against various levels of infection risk in the community and set protocols to respond to changes in risk. For example, a group may decide that Stage 3 infection rates would trigger instruction for most students moving to remote learning, while students who are severely academically at risk might continue to receive in-person instruction in small, cohorted groups with extra personal protective gear provided.

| Recommended thresholds 7-day avg hospital admits | Stage | Practice Good Hygiene | Maintain Social Distancing | Wear Facial Coverings | Higher Risk Individuals Age over 65, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart, lung and kidney disease, immunocompromised, obesity | | | Lower Risk Individuals No substantial underlying health conditions | | | Workplaces Open |
|---|---------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|---|----------------------------|-------------------------|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Stay Home if Sick | | | Avoid Gatherings | Avoid Non-Essential Travel | Avoid Dining/ Shopping | Avoid Gatherings | Avoid Non-Essential Travel | Avoid Dining/ Shopping | |
| | | Avoid Sick People | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 | Stage 1 | • | | | greater than 25 | | except with precautions | gathering size TBD | | all businesses | |
| < 5 | Stage 2 | • | • | • | greater than 10 | | except as essential | greater than 25 | | essential and reopened businesses | |
| 5 - 19 | Stage 3 | • | • | • | social and greater than 10 | • | except as essential | social and greater than 10 | | essential and reopened businesses | |
| 20 - 70 | Stage 4 | • | • | • | social and greater than 2 | • | except as essential | social and greater than 10 | • | expanded essential businesses | |
| > 70 | Stage 5 | • | • | • | outside of household | • | except as essential | outside of household | • | essential businesses only | |

Use this color-coded alert system to understand the stages of risk. This chart provides recommendations on what people should do to stay safe during the pandemic. Individual risk categories identified pertain to known risks of complication and death from COVID-19. This chart is subject to change as the situation evolves.

 [AustinTexas.gov/COVID19](https://austintexas.gov/COVID19) Published: May 28, 2020  Austin Public Health

Costs of Safety

The National Academies had strong—and expensive—priorities for districts in mitigating the health risks for students and staff, such as:

- Reorganizing classrooms to allow physical distancing, such as by lowering class sizes or teaching in larger spaces like cafeterias or outdoors. The report also highlighted "cohorting," in which a teacher and no more than 10 students are kept together and isolated from other groups.
- Encourage all students and staff to wear face masks, and provide free surgical masks for all teachers and staff—not necessarily medical haz-mat equipment, but "a step up from homemade," Scarlett said.
- Prioritize cleaning, ventilation, and air filtration in school infrastructure and hand-washing stations throughout buildings, including through retrofitting older buildings.

Implementing COVID-19-related safety features, particularly around infrastructure upgrades, could cost some \$1.8 million for a single eight-building, 3,200-student district, according to estimates by the [School Superintendents Association](#). Those costs are likely to fall heaviest on the poorest schools and districts, with the oldest buildings, the committee noted.

"You scale that up for my school district, which has 104 schools and in 53,000 students, or then even larger school districts that have hundreds of thousands or even a million students—that cost just gets to be exponentially greater and greater ... and these costs end up falling on our more under-resourced schools and students," Scarlett said. "So these have to be localized and community-based decisions, but ... it's really important for funders, our federal and state legislators and the state boards of education, to think about this."

District leaders should consider reopening schools first in the communities hardest hit by the virus, the guidelines recommend. These communities are likely to have students both in need of academic supports but also grief and trauma counseling and other social supports families often rely on schools to provide. And the report found parents who are both low-income and Black or Latino are more likely to hold jobs that do not allow them to telecommute, meaning that even if their students have Internet access, they are less able to provide support during the day, which a separate Tulane University study out earlier this week found was critical to schools' ability to successfully provide distance learning this spring.

National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen García agreed with the report's call for more funding and input from teachers and parents. "The bottom line is that without a comprehensive plan that includes federal resources to provide for the safety of our students and educators with funding for personal protective equipment, socially distanced instruction, and addressing racial inequity, we could be putting students, their families, and educators in danger," she said on the guidance.

While Eskelsen García seconded the benefits of in-person instruction, she stopped short of endorsing the National Academies' push to prioritize returning elementary students to the classroom full-time.

"Whether school buildings are open or not this fall, educators have been working—and will continue to work—to make sure students have the best possible learning experience and have what they need to succeed. So let's not rush students and educators into classrooms when no one can ensure they are safe yet," she said.

Photo: Teacher Frederique Boisvyon wears a face mask to protect against coronavirus while teaching students, in a school in Chasne sur Illet, western France, on May 14. The National Academies of Science in the U.S. recommend schools provide free surgical-grade face masks for all teachers and staff. Source: David Vincent/AP