

Education Week

Serving Students Who Can't—or Won't—Return to School



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June 24, 2020

As district leaders draft their reopening plans for the 2020-21 school year, they can't lose sight of the students who will not return to school and those who won't be able to access traditional courses.

They may be students with underlying health conditions that put them at risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19, or they may live with family members who are at risk. They may be students who are homebound because of severe physical disabilities. Or they may be students whose parents are just not willing to send them to school until there is a vaccine or effective treatment for the virus.

Similarly, there are special-needs students who may require one-on-one services that are best delivered in a home setting.

Learning Options for Special Populations

For students in some special education programs, who are sick, home-bound, or whose parents opt out of in-person instruction



SOURCE: Los Angeles County Office of Education, Education Week reporting

Here are some alternative options:

Independent study

Districts can provide opportunities for students to work at their own pace, with assignments tailored to their academic needs.

Materials, which should be aligned to state standards, should be available in a variety of formats: printed packets, online assignments, and video lessons, according to the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

Students should also have access to teachers for ongoing support and feedback. And because those students will be away from school for the semester or longer—especially if their peers are back in class—districts must create opportunities for them to engage with classmates.

HOW WE
GO BACK
TO SCHOOL



District and school leaders are confronting difficult, high-stakes decisions as they plan for how to reopen schools amid a global pandemic. Through eight installments, Education Week journalists explore the big challenges education leaders must address, including running a socially distanced school, rethinking how to get students to and from school, and making up for learning losses. We present a broad spectrum of options endorsed by public health officials, explain strategies that some districts will adopt, and provide estimated costs.

For students who are homebound, the districts will have to collaborate with families to figure out the best times for teachers to work with them.

Districts must also create and conduct assessments to track students' progress and ensure that they have technical support to complete assignments.

Small group instruction

Some students thrived in the remote learning environment while others struggled academically.

Small group sessions, either on or off campus, are a good way for districts to tailor intensive academic supports for students who need help to get back on track.

Both staff and students in these small group sessions will follow public health guidelines and safety protocols.

Virtual academies

Virtual schools operated and staffed by local districts are an option for districts that experience high teacher and student opt-out rates when in-person instruction resumes.

Expecting that a significant number of parents may not want to send their children back to school, Guilford County Public Schools in Greensboro, N.C., has asked the state's permission to open two virtual academies, with each school serving about 2,000 students.

The district does not yet know whether it will set up those academies, but it's an option that's on the table that will allow it to retain students (whose families could decide to enroll in other online schools) and keep the funding tied to those students' enrollment.

Though 96 percent of Guilford County's staff indicated in a recent survey that they planned to return when schools reopen, Superintendent Sharon Contreras expects classes in the virtual schools to be taught by district teachers for whom face-to-face instruction might be too risky.