

## Education Week

# Too Expensive to Re-Open Schools? Some Superintendents Say It Is



California Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond at a news conference last fall with Gov. Gavin Newsom. State officials have told school district leaders to prepare for deep spending cuts because of the economic collapse brought on by the coronavirus.

—Rich Pedroncelli/AP-File

**By Daarel Burnette II**

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Kathy Granger has a difficult puzzle to solve. As superintendent of the Mountain Empire Unified School District in southeastern San Diego County, she's forging ahead with plans to re-open school buildings this fall, with a staggering and expensive mix of new health and safety precautions because of COVID-19.

With a 660-square mile district of rugged mountain terrain that borders Baja California, Granger already spends \$1.5 million a year—7 percent of her annual budget—to bus 3,200 students to eight schools. But to make sure kids can be spaced out enough on buses this fall—meaning no more than 20 per bus—Granger figures she needs to quadruple the district's 14 bus routes a day to 56.

Sticker price: \$4.5 million.

That ballooning transportation cost would come just as state officials, including Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, say public schools need to hack as much as 10 percent from their current budgets. Then there's a whole other list of new—and rising—costs to cover: \$40,000 already to buy Plexiglas for the district's front office, free-standing hand sanitizer machines, and handwashing stations in campus outdoor areas where students eat lunch.

“It develops a lot of fatigue,” Granger said about trying to make ends meet. “It’s hard to see the end game.”

With drastic budget cuts on the near horizon in every state, the end game may be keeping buildings closed.

A growing number of school district leaders say they won’t be able to afford the extraordinary efforts required to safely reopen school buildings this fall. Instead, they are considering opening for a few days a week or, worst case scenario, waiting to reopen buildings until a vaccine is developed.

“What does it cost to social distance?” said Michael Griffith, a senior school finance researcher and policy analyst for the Learning Policy Institute, who estimates that states will need to spend an extra \$41 billion in order to reopen school buildings. “How do you provide food service? A lot of districts are going to have to set up dividers in classrooms and install air quality systems. Well, all these things have real costs associated to that. But we’re making budget cuts at the same time we’re asking educators to rethink what a school day looks like.”

Without another federal bailout in sight, most states’ lawmakers will reconvene over the next several weeks to cut billions of dollars out of school districts’ budgets for the 2020-21 school year to deal with a precipitous drop in sales and income tax revenue.

Those cuts will prevent administrators from instituting the sort of health protocols that some medical professionals, teachers, and parents are demanding to further prevent the spread of the virus, including hiring more teachers and increasing bus routes to avoid student crowding, purchasing sufficient face masks and touchless thermometers, and installing protective barriers around teachers’ and office secretaries’ desks.

Nowhere is the debate over the affordability of reopening schools more acute than in California where Newsom last week estimated the state’s public schools will have to cut more than \$19 billion from its K-12 budget over the next two years. Meanwhile, Newsom has encouraged districts to open school buildings as early as this summer. The state has provided districts flexibility over when to do that.

Leaders of six of the state’s largest school districts told California lawmakers that if the governor’s proposal goes through, they can’t safely reopen buildings in the fall.

“We cannot in good conscience risk the health and safety of our students and staff by returning to the classroom prematurely and without funding for the necessary precautions given the continued lack of a national testing program and a lack of clear understanding of the impacts of coronavirus on young people,” wrote the superintendents of Los Angeles Unified, Long Beach Unified, Oakland Unified, Sacramento City Unified, San Diego Unified, and San Francisco Unified.

District administrators in California, including Mountain Empire’s Granger, describe a chaotic, frustrating, and rapidly evolving scenario: Congress has been reluctant to provide more COVID-19 relief beyond the \$13 billion that went out to schools in April; the state’s

department of education has provided little guidance on what “safely reopening” looks like; and teachers and parents are pushing administrators to decide when reopening will happen so they can make plans for next school year.

Most administrators say they’d like to decide by June 1 when and how to open this fall.

Linda Irving, the superintendent of Sebastopol Union School District in Sonoma County, estimates she will have to cut more than 10 percent of her district’s budget this summer if the state’s anticipated budget cuts go through.

Irving and her staff decided last month that they’d like to roll out a hybrid model this fall of distance learning and in-person instruction in classrooms for their 900 students.

But in order to do so, she said, the district will have to purchase 700 Chromebooks, about \$300 each, hire more janitorial staff to more frequently clean the district’s buildings, and purchase thousands of face masks for staff members and students.

“How many masks should I buy?” she asked. “Does our staff need one per day? One per week? If a kid comes to school without a mask on, do we send them home? Should we provide them with one?”

Irving and her team have been searching online for touchless thermometers. She thinks she will need several dozen in order to check students’ temperatures throughout the day. Each week, she said, the price ticks up. The cheapest models she could find cost more than \$80.

Though costs are escalating, she’s painfully aware of the need to get children back in school.

“We need to open up,” Irving said. “It’s what’s best for students. Students need to interact with their teachers and with each other. It’s really a no brainer.”

In rural and spread out districts like Granger’s, costs could escalate even more to ensure students will have access to online learning. She’s considering purchasing satellite devices for her students to access Wi-Fi.

“Some of our kids are totally off the grid,” she said.

And if the district goes with a hybrid plan, keeping children in class for two days a week and out of school for the other three days, she knows parents will need child-care services. The current grants the district uses to run after-school programs can’t cover that sort of demand, she said.

Nationally, budget cuts **will likely fall on districts** that serve a disproportionate number of black, Latino, and poor students who live in communities hit hard by the pandemic.

Some district leaders say they will need to hire extra counselors to help students cope with the emotional trauma of seeing family members die from the coronavirus; more teachers to help students who were academically behind before the pandemic shut schools down for the rest of the year; and on-site nurses to help principals prevent the further spread of the virus.

Cindy Marten, the superintendent of the San Diego Unified district, which annually spends more than \$1 billion, said her costs will jump another 20 percent in order to safely open schools this fall.

The staff, along with the district's pediatrician, has spent the last several weeks devising a reopening plan that will require students to attend school five days a week.

"I'm not ready to give up yet," she said. "Our state still has time. There's room for the federal government to help. A lot can happen this summer. But we need to be very clear about what it's going to take."