National Urban League

RESTART SMART:
A GUIDE TO SCHOOL REOPENING DURING A PANDEMIC

FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

AS STUDENTS, FAMILIES, EDUCATORS, AND SCHOOL STAFF prepare for the 2020-21 school year, America is facing the layered impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, economic crises, and structural racial inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and heightened national attention and mobilization being directed toward systemic racism and police violence in our country.

This pandemic has unveiled long-standing racial inequities in our nation's public school system. And the resultant school closures across the country have again disproportionately impacted low-income and students of color. These students and families are more likely to lack both reliable and high-speed internet access, are not well-prepared to take the best advantage of online learning platforms at home, cope with food insecurities made worse by the pandemic, and face higher levels of learning loss when compared with their peers from wealthier backgrounds, schools, and districts. The education system has failed to provide equitable access to students with the greatest needs, including students from low-income households, students with disabilities, students facing homelessness and housing insecurity, English learners, students in foster care, and students engaged in the juvenile justice system. These breakdowns have widened racial disparities, causing disproportionate harm to Black, Latino, and indigenous students.

State, district, and school leaders must focus on building the assets of students, particularly vulnerable and historically disadvantaged student groups; analyze the impact of COVID related policies on the health and wellness (mental, physical, social, emotional) of students, families, caregivers, educators, and school staff of color in order to understand how the systemic and institutional barriers and lack of equitable access to opportunity they face have been exacerbated by the pandemic; and plan for school reopening with an equitable approach to provide a high-quality education to all students. As a matter of public policy and justice, elected officials, appointed officials, and educational leaders must prioritize health and safety in getting students back to school and fully supported in their learning and development.

FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

WHILE THE NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE BELIEVES that high-quality in-person instruction is the ideal for student learning, this may not be consistently possible in many places due to public health concerns. As such, the health and safety of students, teachers, and their families must come first when considering any plan for reopening schools.

To that end, any decision on school reopening must be conditioned on meeting the following four principles with public health concerns kept top of mind. If these principles cannot be met, we believe that school buildings should remain closed, and school systems should redouble their efforts to ensure that every student will have the support, resources, and opportunities imperative to be both truly educated and fully supported in a high-quality learning environment, whether that be in a virtual setting or in-person.

1 **HEALTH & SAFETY FIRST—The decision to reopen must be consistent with the guidance of public health authorities to keep students, educators, school staff, and families safe.**

2 **FAMILY & COMMUNITY INPUT—The decision to reopen must be made in ongoing collaboration with parents, families, and community stakeholders.**

3 **AN INTENTIONAL FOCUS ON EQUITY—Reopening plans, whether in-person, virtual, or a hybrid version of the two (and any decision to alter that plan) must specifically promote equity by ensuring that every child has access to a high-quality, well-rounded education regardless of his or her race, income, or zip code.**

4 **RESOURCES & FUNDING—States must ensure that schools have adequate resource levels and flexible funding policies that are necessary to provide equitable access to safe, supportive, and high-quality learning.**

CONCERNS & ACTIONS

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic offers opportunities to reinvent teaching and learning across a number of dimensions. As students, parents, caregivers, and advocates prepare for the school year and engage with educators, staff, and district leaders, this actionable guide can serve as a resource to ensure that health, wellness, educational equity, and high-quality learning are at the center of school reopening plans. Parents and advocates need to take action now.

HEALTH & SAFETY FIRST

KEY CONCERNS

How does the district plan to mitigate risk for staff and students with underlying health conditions such as immunocompromised lung or heart conditions, diabetes, mild or severe asthma, and/or obesity?

Does each school have adequate soap and working sinks to allow for frequent handwashing?

What has the district determined about the state of the ventilation system in each building?

What is the established relationship between the local school district and health department?

What personal protective equipment (PPE) is being provided to students, staff, and educators by the school and district? What are the PPE requirements for in-school activities and instruction and how will they be implemented for students and staff?

What daily disinfecting protocols has the district put in place? Who is responsible for monitoring that these protocols are followed and on what schedule they will be checked?

IN THE EVENT OF A CONFIRMED CASE AT SCHOOL:

- What isolation protocols are in place?
- What health staffing is in place?
- For how long (minimum) will any quarantine or closure be implemented?
- What are the processes and policies related to notification of positive cases and contacts?
- What cleaning protocols does the district need to have ready?
- Does the district have a trained team for the execution of critical contact tracing, cleaning, closing/reopening, and continued learning functions?

ACTIONS

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFETY AMIDST COVID-19

- Children under 19 represent 22% of the population and, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association, there was a 40% increase in pediatric coronavirus cases nationwide in the last two weeks of July, with nearly 100,000 testing positive at that time. And, while the risk of children dying or becoming critically ill remains low, one recent study suggests that older children can transmit the virus just as much as adults, raising even more doubts about their role in transmissions.

- Moreover, Black and Latino children have disproportionately higher rates of coronavirus infections and are more likely to develop severe symptoms that require hospitalization than white children.

- Schools and districts must distribute informational material and guides, sourced from public health experts, that are specific to schools or that address the school-aged population. These include information on best practices for monitoring and responding to COVID-19 symptoms.

- Encourage age-appropriate conversations with children and youth about the severity of COVID-19 and work to eliminate misinformation, misconceptions, and conspiracy theories.

- Reinforce healthful hygiene habits and disseminate information on wellness and self-care.

  The CDC has created a list of recommendations to support adults in having conversations with children and youth about COVID-19 and healthy habits to practice.

STAY INFORMED BY LOCAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES

- States and districts must enforce health protocols and guidelines for physical distancing, behaviors to reduce spread, and healthful environmental and operational maintenance. These should be aligned with the recommendations from local health experts.

- School protocols and expectations should be well-documented, communicated to parents and families, and be accessible in both form and language.

- Ensure access to credible, up-to-date information on local COVID-19 cases and responses from local health departments.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY INPUT

KEY CONCERNS

In what ways have parents and families been meaningfully and consistently involved in decisions about reopening?

How many students have parents and relatives who are essential workers? Are there plans and precautions in place to provide supervision for essential worker's children? Are there any students who perform essential services in afterschool or weekend jobs or volunteer opportunities?

How will supports and resources that promote social and emotional learning and development be identified for students, families, educators, building staff, and community stakeholders? What types of mental health supports has the district put into place?

Are educators and school staff being trained in social and emotional learning practices and trauma-informed care?

ACTIONS

IDENTIFY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BURDENS AND TRAUMAS THAT HAVE OCCURRED AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC AND PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS TO STUDENTS, PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND FAMILIES

- Invest in mental health professionals, counselors (including guidance and college and career counselors), social workers, and therapists as foundational to any reopening plan. Create accessible and ongoing opportunities for individual and group counseling for students, families, staff, and educators because caring professionals enable students to be supported academically and emotionally. It's vital to have a plan in place to comfort students, staff, and educators who experienced loss since March, matched to a particular emphasis on providing support and comfort for students, staff, and educators as they experience grief and loss over the coming school year.

- Develop multiple spaces where students and educators can foster relationships amongst the school community. Establish clear and comprehensive norms, routines, and regular opportunities (in-person and virtual) for students to engage with their peers, and with trustworthy adults, to learn about one another, build relationships, and create support systems so that students will feel comfortable to vocalize their needs, their experiences, and their questions which allows for healing and growth.

- *Touch-Base Meetings/Check-Ins:* Conduct ongoing virtual meetings between educators, students, and families to check-in and have both academic and personal conversations. These need to be intentional and systematic. At the start of the academic year, these meetings can provide an opportunity to develop a good rapport through sharing summer activities, feelings about the pandemic, coping mechanisms, and plans and

expectations for the school year. This approach will help to create a solid foundation of trust and understanding that will carry on throughout the year. Learning Heroes, along with the National PTA and Univision, has two resources to help parents, teachers, and students—Ready to Partner outlines 5 steps to help parents navigate the school year and the Parent-Teacher Partnership Tool helps bring parents, teachers, and students together to co-create a plan for student success.

- *Socially Distant and Virtual Restorative Circles:* Foster a community where students develop a sense of belonging and connectedness in school.

  At least one hour per week should be dedicated to bringing groups of students together (in-person when possible and virtual as necessary) to reflect on co-developed topics, current events, aspirations, questions, or to process their emotions as they engage in dialogue and conversation with one another.

  Having open and honest conversations about mental health can demystify social and emotional well-being. Two examples would be (1) educators and out-of-school-time providers should be encouraged to integrate mental health discussions into the curriculum; (2) mindfulness and yoga practices during and after school hours can be beneficial for youth and their families.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY INPUT cont'd

ACTIONS

- *Daily/Weekly Journaling:* These exercises are beneficial for students and their families to reflect on their learning experiences and personal lives. This can serve as a foundation for understanding supports and resources that are needed.

- Provide training for staff in understanding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and best practices regarding trauma-informed care. Ask young people to reflect on their social and emotional growth experienced under the pandemic. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a SEL Roadmap for Reopening Schools (July 2020) that includes critical practices and resources for students, families, teachers, and school staff.

- Foster collaboration between educators and staff, through team meetings and digital communication, to create an environment for sharing best practices, innovative ideas, and reciprocal guidance and support. Teachers and aides from previous grades can advise the teacher for the next grade to smooth the pathway from one stage to the next.

- Establish, foster, and develop intentional, fully supported, and meaningful relationships between school staff (administrative staff, custodial staff, cafeteria staff, etc.) and students.

- Self-Care Circles: Build positive connections with teachers, school staff, and community stakeholders to reflect on self-care practices. Adults will be able to practice self-reflection and develop relationships with colleagues.

#3 AN INTENTIONAL FOCUS ON EQUITY

KEY CONCERNS

How many students require services and accommodations that are delivered in a school setting? In what ways will teaching and learning be differentiated to meet the needs of all students?

> If the district is using a hybrid model, what supports are in place to ensure that services are continued in the event of an emergency quarantine/shutdown even in a remote learning situation?

How is the district prioritizing the most vulnerable students in its reopening plan? (Inclusive of, but not limited to, students from low-income households, students with disabilities, students facing homelessness and housing insecurity, English learners, students in foster care, and students engaged in the juvenile justice system)

How are the school and district defining attendance and truancy? How will these definitions shape the learning experience for students in an in-person, hybrid, or full remote educational space?

How is the district ensuring that each child (not household) is equipped with adequate devices and connectivity to participate fully in schoolwork? This will be important for periods of remote learning if there are virus flare-ups, as well as ameliorating learning loss with supplemental practice, projects, and activities. What is the process for repairing district issued equipment or to receive replacement devices?

How is the district emphasizing culturally sensitive, non-punitive discipline practices? During remote learning, children should not be penalized for behaviors such as eating during classes, failing to wear a uniform, or failing to show their background surroundings. In in-person settings, schools should mandate mask-wearing and social distancing and have adequate PPE to give students masks if they come to school without one. Similarly, schools should design classroom layouts to allow for adequate physical distancing without depending on students to comply 100% of the time.

ACTIONS

REIMAGINE EDUCATION BY PARTNERING WITH DISTRICTS, PRINCIPALS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO MEET STUDENT AND FAMILY NEEDS, BEING MINDFUL OF THE ARRAY OF COMMUNITY ASSETS ALREADY IN THE LIVES OF STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

- *Initiate virtual home visits:* Educators have one-on-one time with students and families to identify what supports and resources are most needed in their home environments and individual situations.

- *Establish or deepen partnerships with child and youth-serving organizations, agencies, institutions, and coalitions* in order to expose students to a variety of educational and developmental settings and supports. Potential partners include community stakeholders such as out-of-school time providers, childcare and early learning centers, museums, art institutions, and workforce development providers.

- *Establish virtual apprenticeships:* Community members work with students to connect academic content with real-world work.

> Examples: Local public health officials educate students on the science and impacts of COVID-19 and best practices to stay healthy and safe during the pandemic; engineers provide students with opportunities to build and test creations using mathematics and science; and scientists walk students through real-life experiments.

ACTIONS

- *Organize youth/peer meetings leading to student-led conferences:* Students have a designated time each week to talk to their peers, discuss shared difficulties, and identify how they can be best supported in their academic and personal lives. This will build a foundation amongst peers and foster a community where every individual feels seen, heard, and validated. Student-led conferences enable youth to find and use their voices when speaking to educators and families about their educational experiences. They have more autonomy and learn about independence and self-advocacy.

- *Provide a safe space/restorative justice circle:* Conversations will enable individuals to find common ground and build community. The heightened racial disparities can be brought into restorative circle sessions that will engage students in discussions to find a voice in the process of becoming agents of change, furthering the social justice movement. These circles can also be a non-punitive solution for infractions such as breaches of physical distancing and mask-wearing mandates.

ELIMINATE THE "ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL" APPROACH TO ADDRESSING THE NEEDS AND ASSETS OF STUDENTS

- Accept students as they learn who they are and understand how they best learn. Ask students how they prefer to approach new information—through hands-on approaches, via visual representations, and/or to work individually or with others.

- Differentiate teaching and learning to accommodate all students and their diverse learning styles, assets, and needs. Children and youth need to have resources and support readily and transparently available to them.

  > Examples: Provide videos and images for visual learners, audio recordings for auditory learners, and manipulatives and materials for kinesthetic learners. Schools should coordinate helping parents access manipulatives for students that need them.

  > Allow students to access recorded teacher lectures and class discussions on their own time in case of absence or need to repeat information. Allow them to complete assignments for assessment in a window of time, rather than counting "seat time" in front of a screen.

- Create regular opportunities for one-on-one tutoring and help with assignments, either virtual or in-person. Apply daily high-dose tutoring to struggling students and those exhibiting learning loss.

- Give teachers tools to utilize formative assessments to evaluate how students are learning material and track their progress in order to make necessary adjustments to instruction and curriculum.

  > Examples: Journal entries; entry and exit tickets; concept maps; think, pair, and share activities; quizzes; polls; and self-assessments all adapted for either virtual or physical space.

- Don't require teachers to teach virtual and in-person classes simultaneously. This clearly disadvantages online learners who are already faced with a sub-optimal learning experience.

- Don't try to recreate the school day schedule online. Adhere to age-appropriate screen-time guidelines coming from medical and educational professionals relative to new information about attention and focus.

#4

RESOURCES & FUNDING

KEY CONCERNS

How are districts helping students, staff, and families to consistently have broadband Internet access?

Are the districts providing equitable access to digital technologies (equipment, etc.) and to virtual platforms? Do they provide training and support for students, parents, caregivers, and educators to ensure they are digitally literate and have support for technical glitches?

Do schools have the resources and funding needed to purchase PPE, hire additional teaching, housekeeping, and support personnel, ensure adequate school bus transportation, and retrofit and disinfect buildings and classrooms to ensure health and safety throughout the entire school year?

What opportunities exist to introduce additional flexibility into funding policies and/or braid funding in ways that allow for more aligned and intentionally coordinated investments of resources across a number of sources?

ACTIONS

BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

- The National Urban League, Alliance for Excellent Education, National Indian Education Association, and UnidosUS released an analysis that finds that one in three Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native families do not have high-speed home Internet access. Across all races and ethnicities, nearly 17 million children nationwide do not have the high-speed home Internet access needed to fully participate in online learning. Funding should be allocated to provide digital technologies and broadband hotspots to students who do not have equipment or reliable access. As is feasible, schools and district leaders should attempt to provide equipment to each student, not to each family as students of different ages will have different assignments throughout the day and their schedules may conflict with one another. Districts must regularly disseminate information that is clear and accessible to students and families regarding the available technologies and how to obtain them. They should develop a plan to ensure that students and parents who rely on public transportation can receive these materials when public transportation is not a safe or accessible option.

- Administrators must also be accountable for protecting students' privacy and protecting them from surveillance and data mining. When private companies or contractors assist with remote learning, they can record a treasure trove of student data that can then be monetized or used to develop products that they will later ask school districts to purchase. "Bad actors" can also use school tech as a portal to access students in other inappropriate ways. Staff should be trained to guard against this technical abuse by utilizing best teaching practices. Educators should be discouraged from surveilling students in ways that trigger punitive discipline unrelated to school performance or unfounded negative impacts for immigrant, impoverished, or other vulnerable families.

- Take the time before the academic year begins to gather data on students who lacked resources and opportunities during the previous school year or who were never able to, or willing to, log onto virtual education platforms in order to ensure that everyone is prepared for the upcoming school year. Survey students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders to analyze the resources they lack and the perspectives that they can offer on remote strategies, access, and equipment.

- Partner with postal services, transportation staff, and food provision teams to provide alternative or supplementary printed assignments that do not require technology.

RESOURCES & FUNDING cont'd

ACTIONS

DEVELOP AND ENHANCE DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

- Partner with companies that provide basic technology training. Tech Goes Home (TGH) is a nonprofit organization that offers programs in digital skill training conducted by trained staff members. TGH also created a Digital Learning Guide that outlines computer basics, online access, and other digital tools.

- Utilize free, online tutorials to improve skills in computer basics, social media, and communication platforms. GCF Learn Free offers over 200 free tutorials on a variety of topics.

- The National Afterschool Association (NAA) has developed a Tech Toolkit to support after-school

educators with the use of technology. Through their technology courses and training, afterschool educators can learn to give students access to technology and facilitate learning in a digital environment.

- EveryoneOn has an online tool to help individuals find low-cost internet service and computers in their areas and stay connected during this time.

- In addition to providing virtual homework help and tutoring, create a hotline to offer technical support for students, families, and educators.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EDUCATIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES AND PLATFORMS

- *Student-Led Messaging Platforms, Facebook Messenger, GroupMe, WhatsApp, Signal Vine and Telegram:* Students can utilize messaging platforms to communicate and collaborate. They can summarize lessons for their peers, share notes and content, and learn from one another in an informal environment. Students can also use these platforms to share their experiences, insights, and advice with younger peers, thereby reaffirming relationships and building a community amongst peers.

- *Google Classroom's accessible learning management system:* G Suite for Education allows students to use the same log-in information to access a variety of external apps from Google Classroom. Teachers can input the links to outside resources for assignments [ex: Newsela, Padlet, Epic!, Book Creator] for students to have direct access.

- *Matriculate,* a part of College Point, offers free virtual advice from trained college students to support high school juniors in their college application process.

PRIORITIZE FINANCIAL SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

- Provide appropriate and adequate PPE for all students and school personnel on an ongoing basis.

- Utilize available funding to give students daily and regular access to a school nurse, as well as ongoing access to mental health professionals/counseling, and health screenings prior to entering school buildings.

- Renovate school buildings and learning spaces to increase ventilation rates and filtration to improve indoor air quality. Collaborative for High Performance

Schools (CHPS) created a guide for School Ventilation for COVID-19 (June 2020), highlighting the importance of increased circulation of outdoor air into buildings to remove airborne respiratory droplets from the space more quickly.

- Fund partnerships between schools and organizations including community partners, youth development organizations, out-of-school time programs, and mental health and social services.

BUILDING STRONGER AND SAFER SCHOOLS

ADVOCATES SHOULD ENCOURAGE states and school districts to use these four principles to guide and inform their school reopening plans.

Community-based civil rights partners, educators, community leaders, equity advocates, parents, students, families, and administrators should hold their school districts accountable for the design and implementation of reopening plans that prioritize health, equity, and the most vulnerable students.

State and district leaders should ensure that the policies and practices adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are equitable, transparent, understandable, and accessible to students, families, educators, and community stakeholders.

Data should be routinely collected throughout the year to monitor the implementation of these plans and their impact on students, families, and educators, whether or not education and related supports are delivered in-person or in remote/distance learning environments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Alliance for Resource Equity — Education Resource Equity Toolkit
and An Advocate's Guide to District-Level Equity Actions

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American Youth Policy Forum — COVID-19 Response Information Hub

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Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child — Adverse Childhood
Experiences and Toxic Stress FAQ

- -

Johns Hopkins University eSchool+ Initiative — Analysis of School Reopening
Plans, by State and Territory

- -

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) —
Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools Action Guide

- -

The Aspen Institute — From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope:
Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, &
Academic Development and Recovery and Renewal: Principles For Advancing
Public Education Post-Crisis

- -

The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine — Supporting
Adolescent Health and Development: What Decision Makers Need to Know

- -

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network — Trauma-Informed Care

- -

The *New York Times* — The *New York Times* has a helpful tracker by county
that overlays the CDC, WHO and WH guidelines for when places should open
schools for in-person learning.

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The University of Chicago, Urban Education Institute — Cultivating Social,
Emotional, and Academic Development

CONCLUSION

THE NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE strongly believes that any school-reopening decisions (whether they include in-person instruction, virtual learning, or a hybrid) must be conditioned on meeting the four guiding principles. We stand by these principles, and we believe that these recommendations are actionable and achievable steps that policymakers and educational leaders can make to ensure the health and safety of students, families, educators, and school-based staff.

School buildings should remain closed until these principles can be met and safety assured. Until it is safe to return to in-person instruction, school systems must shift their efforts toward providing high-quality virtual instruction and necessary support to students, parents, and caregivers, prioritizing the most vulnerable students and their most urgent needs. Every student should have the support, resources, and opportunities imperative to be truly educated and fully supported in a high-quality learning environment.

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