

What Educators Need to Go Back to School

By Christina Mazzanti

Even if you don't follow education news, track the latest poll results, or even participate in online member surveys, one thing is clear: educators across the nation are voicing their concerns about going back to school this year. Regardless of the size of the district or the region of the country – this will be a fall like none other in anyone's career and it seems that no two districts will kick off the school year in the same way.

Start dates, methods of instruction, curricula, channels of communication, school year calendars and daily schedules, special needs supports, safety and health protocols, and mental and physical health precautions are all being rewritten. The new normal will look very little like the old normal. This paradigm shift offers some extraordinary possibilities but some common and long-standing "school traditions" may no longer be

recommended or realistic within new guidelines, such as extracurricular clubs and sports, grading or marking periods, or awards for perfect attendance.

Veteran educators, newly graduated first-year teachers, specialists, administrators, and entire communities are all watching, researching, and planning for basically — the unknown. Can we even call it the "first back-to-school *after* COVID-19?" Is it? Will the fall be "after the pandemic?" Or will schools in many parts of the country be facing rolling closures after new spikes or second waves of cases appear, as national health experts predict?

According to CDC guidelines, an estimated 18 percent of teachers and 27 percent of principals fall within the vulnerable age range and are at higher risk of infection. The number is likely higher when taking into account

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other school personnel such as cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians, and administrators. What does this mean for the educational work force? In a *USA Today*/Ipsos poll, one in five educators expressed health safety concerns about returning to classrooms. Schools will need to think of creative ways of reassigning these educators, possibly to teach online or to serve as virtual mentors for students.

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There are also gaps. The pandemic did not create the gaps in our education system or in our country; it simply exposed and exacerbated the already existing gaps. These tragic gaps are not only in the access to technology, distribution of devices, effective blended lesson content, or online educator training but also the other long-simmering and deeply entrenched gaps in equality, equity, and racial justice that have been a part of our education system and national fiber since their founding. As educator, attorney, and advocate Colin Seale stated, “Without a plan to achieve racial justice in schools, any post-COVID-19 plan for reopening schools is inherently flawed.”

Considering all these and many more issues, state-based road maps for reopening schools continue to roll out, however, what are educators saying they need to be ready to go back to school?

Educators want to be assured that it is safe to go back into schools. They need to know that they have the guidelines, tools, curriculum, and training to be able to pivot confidently and productively from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction as the resurgence of

cases dictates, without the last-minute scrambles and multiple policy changes that came with the school closures in early spring. AAE members reported that many educators (48%) transitioned to using tools on which they had little training or experience and yet a majority of educators (67%) are planning to use these tools to enhance their traditional classroom when schools reopen. However, one of educators' biggest concerns that appears consistently across surveys is their being held accountable for making up for potentially six months of learning loss per pupil in the 2020–2021 school year. Specifically, in a recent national survey, respondents cited “unrealistic expectations for getting students back on track” as their number one concern when returning to the classroom. Special education students and ESL students, many of whom suffered from a substantial loss of supports and services, will require an even longer duration for retrieving that learning loss. Yet, despite fears of “COVID-19 slide” learning loss, only 15 percent of teachers favor extension of the school year including starting the year early or extending it into summer of 2021.

Educators and students have weathered emergency remote instruction — most would agree, with less than ideal or wholly satisfactory outcomes. Equity and access issues must take priority as we move forward. “Old school” has been replaced with “Pre-COVID.” As we prepare for the dawn of a new model of the “classroom,” it is clear that blended learning and individualized instruction are no longer sidelined, experimental, or for a subset of learners. They are here to stay for all students and all educators. ■



Christina Mazzanti is the director of communications for the Association of American Educators. She is responsible for advancing AAE's mission, growth, and member service delivery through internal and external communications strategies.

Why Membership Is More Important Than Ever: Protection, Professionalism, and Support

Educators have long chosen to be members of AAE and AAE state chapters because they find this is one professional organization that has always put their legal protection, their professionalism, and their dedication to the mission of educating our children first. We support your advocacy and your voice for your students and we always will. Here is how some of our members and member leaders expressed why they feel their membership is more important than ever:

“Joining AAE has been one of the best decisions I ever made! I believe it is important to stay connected with other educators from around the United States and remember that we are not alone. **AAE has many opportunities to reach out and connect with others.** During these past months I have found tips and resources to use while teaching from home. Lately it seems everywhere I turn, things become political. **One of my favorite things about this association is the fact that it isn't political.** I joined this association to strengthen my profession and have confidence that I am supported by other educators. Together we can make a difference. Now more than ever we must stand together and continue to work toward preparing the adults of tomorrow; the future is in our hands.”

— Kathleen Jensen, AAE Member



“Teachers need advocates, now more than ever. Those of us who choose to teach beyond the traditional public school have advocates in the members of PACE-AAE — people who can think outside the box to help us make decisions about what our buildings and classrooms can look like going forward. As members, we are able to access training, grants, scholarships, professional resources, and the expertise of other educators who are using their voice to advocate for us and the kids we serve at the local, state, and national levels. It's that expertise, and those voices, that will make the difference for our professional experiences and for what the students we serve experience in the next several years. **It's a good feeling, knowing that someone is our advocate.**”

— Teresa Brown, PACE Member and AAE Foundation Advocacy Fellow



“Educators need to lean on each other to get through this difficult time. We need now more than ever to advocate for our kids and be there when they need us. Sometimes, as much as we hope we will know the right path, deep down we know we need help to get that voice for our kids. We alone can only do so much but ASTA-AAE can be there to help when we feel we have met our limit. **One of the best ways to do this is to stay positive and reach out to ASTA-AAE for assistance in understanding this new world.** Our students will need creative ways to learn that we never imagined, and working together/sharing resources will be the only way to get this done.”

— Jessica Franklin, ASTA Member Leader



“Everyone needs a champion. These are words that have touched many of us as we consider how we can guide and support our young learners to facilitate meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, we educators need our champions as well. **We shoulder a great work, so having space to commune, share best practices, lament, and access resources is most critical.** I am so thankful for the champions we have in AAE and the entire AAE community across the country.”

— Nadia Reese, AAE Georgia Member Leader



“Membership in NWPE-AAE allows educators to have legal protection against unjustified job termination and/or demotion. However, what is more important, it allows members to work with their school districts and administrators without the fear of outside demands and/or influences. A member can discuss and negotiate with the district as to what is best for the district and the educator. Being independent of an outside group means your voice counts just as much as the next educator. No one can speak for you and force you to agree with ideas that you don't support. **Your membership protects your job and your beliefs to do what is best for your students.**”

— Kim Zeydel, NWPE Member 2015 Idaho Teacher of the Year



“AAE is a great resource for school leaders and teachers to fulfill their professional obligations effectively. Our job is constantly changing with new developments, and is becoming more complex every day. We, as educators, have to adapt to the new reality of an ever-evolving environment. **AAE helps us make those transitions by providing educational resources, legal representation, and policy advocacy** in a collaborative and politics-free environment. With the assistance and support from AAE, we are able to put students first!”

— Dr. Namik Sercan, AAE New Jersey Member Leader



We always welcome your thoughts and feedback about your membership! Tell us why you joined at editor@aaeteachers.org.

Have you ever considered being a member leader? Contact Shanna Morgason shanna@aaeteachers.org for more information.



Summer Reading Recommendations

Focus on SEL

As professional educators, we all work daily to ensure that our students have the knowledge they need for successful futures. We all know that the core to that success is for every child to have literacy skills and to read and write with fluency. We work to build their skills in math, science, social studies, computer science, music, and art. I think intuitively though, all of our work is in fact grounded in a continual emphasis on social/emotional development. While it may not be the first thing that comes to mind when we share what we do, it is deeply grounded in everything we do. When I was in the classroom and was asked, “What do you teach?” I often responded with my subject matter. It never occurred to me to say, “I teach my students to be kind, understanding, compassionate, caring members of their communities.” However, ultimately I hope in a small way — I did exactly that.

As we go back to school in fall 2020, whatever that may look like, I know that now more than ever, we need to support our students’ social and emotional development. Shared reading is a wonderful way to do that. There are so many great books out there to share with students that support social emotional learning. There are wonderful characters we can share with our students who can serve as models. One of my favorite characters is Atticus Finch — my personal hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Mr. Finch demonstrates courage and integrity in the face of adversity. Our



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children live in a world where resilience, courage, perseverance, kindness, and empathy will breathe life and meaning into the future.

Here are some suggestions to share with your students. They are the dog-eared favorites from my children and grandchildren that I hope will bring your community of learners together this year.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is this ability to adjust when things do not go as expected or when they change. The one constant we can all depend upon is that things change. We cannot always predict what will happen. Two books that encourage resiliency in your students are:



After the Fall (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again) by Dan Santat



The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires

PATIENCE

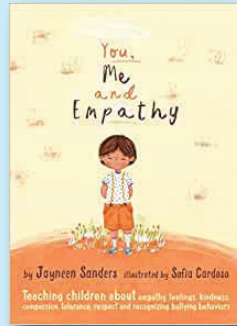
Patience is a virtue, or so we are told. Patience can be difficult for all of us from time to time. For many of our students waiting is simply torture. One of my favorite titles that is a fun look at patience is:



A Little SPOT of Patience: A Story about How to Enjoy Waiting
by Diane Alber

EMPATHY

Children learn what they live, and in a world filled with many troublesome things, perhaps the greatest gift we can give them is a foundation built on compassion and empathy. When we can step into the shoes of others and know what they are feeling and respond with care and love, we can change the course of a human life. I simply cannot overstate how important empathy is for all of us. My favorite read that shares this value is:



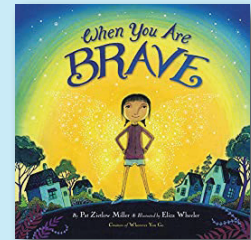
You, Me and Empathy: Teaching Children about Empathy, Feelings, Kindness, Compassion, Tolerance and Recognizing Bullying Behaviors
by Jayneen Sanders

COURAGE

G.K. Chesterton once said, “Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.” The dragons who live among us can only be slain by those who have found their bravery and courage. Our students have encountered dragons with names such as Injustice, Cruelty, Hunger, Intolerance, and even Evil. They require courage and bravery to face down those dragons. It is my hope that these two books help your students slay the dragons they may face.



A Little SPOT of Courage: A Story about Being Brave
by Diane Alber



When You Are Brave
by Pat Zietlow Miller and Eliza Wheeler

With all of these challenging topics, often a book is the catalyst to open the conversation. Older students can learn from the examples found in literature. Powerful characters such as Charlotte Doyle, Hermione Grainger, Gandolf, and even Superman can be used as models for these characteristics. Our world today requires that our children practice social and emotional skills daily. They will need them to form strong relationships with others. They will need them to create successful futures. They will need them to change the world for good. ■



Dr. Elizabeth Davis serves as the PACE state director. She is deeply committed to supporting teachers as professionals and has encouraged the work of PACE in her roles as a teacher and administrator in Colorado schools. Prior to her leadership role with PACE, Elizabeth began her career in education in 1985 as a teacher in Southern California. Later moving to Colorado in 2003, she served Colorado students in virtual environments as a teacher and administrator.

Advocacy Update

The 2020 AAE Foundation Advocacy Fellows are members, leaders, teachers, administrators, community organizers, parents, coaches, and counselors. They represent an array of beliefs and convictions, backgrounds, and experiences, but the one thing that unites them is their commitment to our students. This year's advocacy fellowship started with a call to action — “Make Your Voice Heard,” and over the past five months, our fellows have done just that.

The fellowship calls for members to write opinion editorials, provide commentary, engage in digital advocacy, attend events, write testimonies for legislative hearings, and even meet with our elected officials and district leaders. During the past five months, AAEF's Advocacy Fellows have written more than 42 op-eds, letters, and commentary. Several articles have been published by local and national news media outlets, and our voices continue to amplify the need for change in our education system. They have spoken before legislators and at events, and have peacefully protested as the

country responds to racial injustices. They are making their voices heard.

As we enter the summer months, prepare for the fall, and acknowledge the growing social justice and racial equity movements across the country, the need for advocates remains great. Our children and our communities have been deeply impacted by COVID-19, by violence, and by injustices, and our students are experiencing traumas that we may not be able to detect while they are home.

In her recent op-ed, Joli Sotallaro from Arkansas shares her reflections on COVID-19 and how important our next steps will be as an educational community and as allies with children and families. ■



Kira Tookes is the director of advocacy for AAE Foundation. In this role, Kira is responsible for recruiting, training, developing, and empowering teachers to make strategic and impactful policy advancements for the benefit of all children.

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

Want to find out more about virtual advocacy training?
Contact Kira Tookes at kira@aaeteachers.org

Summer break is here, and for the first time in my teaching career, I am left to wrap up the school year without the typical traditions of field days, yearbook signings, and games. All the events that provide closure and celebrate a year of learning and growth have been shifted to digital platforms, and have left me and many teachers with a feeling of unease and a sense that this year could not possibly be over. In the process of cleaning and closing down my classroom, I reflected on what has undoubtedly been one of the most difficult years.

First and foremost, I still love teaching. The opportunity to build relationships with students and to watch them develop into young adults gives a strong sense of purpose and passion to my life. There are very few professions in which a person regularly has the opportunity to see students set goals, ask questions, think for themselves, and grow into the next generation of world-changers. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the jarring shift from the classroom to digital learning, I have had new opportunities to learn and be creative in instruction. Determining the best method to communicate learning and figuring out how to help students connect with classroom material from their homes have helped me to develop a new set of skills and to grow as an educator.

Just as reflecting on the year confirmed my love of teaching, the fact that teaching has become more challenging during this time is also very apparent. Managing a digital Zoom classroom is very different from managing the traditional learning environment. Providing real-time feedback and helping students to ask questions and find answers through peer-led, academic conversations is much more challenging than it was in the classroom. The most important part of teaching, building, and maintaining good relationships with students is more challenging than ever before. The small conversations that led to big connections — the short conversations in the hallway, at the lockers, or in the lunchroom — are no more, and many teachers are struggling to find a way to connect to each student on a personal level through Zoom, email, and chat features. In addition to teachers' struggles to connect, students are also struggling to connect with teachers and each other as the role of many students has changed dramatically. Many older students are expected to watch younger siblings or are working to help their families through this time. Other students and their families are dealing with a loss of income, illness, or other financial struggles, and providing support for all students during this time is critical.

Looming in the back of my mind like storm clouds on the horizon are the concerns about next year: what school will look like, how can I be a more effective educator in a time of upheaval, and when will guidance be issued so that the planning can begin? Teachers, parents, students, administrators, and staff

are anxiously awaiting answers to the pressing issues facing all communities for the upcoming school year.

Questions such as:

- What will the criteria and requirements be to reopen schools? When will a reentry plan be released?
- Who gets to determine the acceptable risk of foreseeable harm in our public schools if we return to on-site instruction?
- Will students and staff members be required to wear masks?
- How will the budget for public schools be impacted, and what measures are being taken to ensure equitable access to funds for all schools?
- Is a hybrid schedule with some online and some on-site instruction a possibility? Would this plan meet the needs of working parents throughout the state? Would this plan provide internet and computer access for households that do not currently have it?
- Will teachers be provided with opportunities for professional development so that they can adequately meet the needs of all students, including students with different learning abilities?
- Will schools be provided funding to order Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)? Does the supply chain have the capacity to handle the demand if schools are open for on-site instruction?
- How will the plan for transportation of students to and from schools be implemented? What will be done to ensure that geographically large, rural districts are able to implement these plans?

As the time comes for these questions to be answered and plans to be made, I implore state, community, and school leaders to give teachers a seat at the table. Rather than issue directives for teachers to wade through and figure out, allow our expertise and education to provide a valued voice for our students and the profession. Reach out to the parents and students in the community to start meaningful conversations so that the needs of all students can be met.

This op-ed was published on the AAE website on July 2, 2020. <https://www.aateachers.org/index.php/blog>



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Your Rights in a Changing Workplace

School is just around the corner. Most of you have a routine and standard tasks for a return to the classroom. In a year that has proven less than ordinary, your classroom, school, and work environments may be changed for the foreseeable future. In addition, a number of people have health conditions that make the return to work more difficult or even impossible. Knowing your rights during this time is important and necessary.

1. You have the right to seek an accommodation under certain circumstances. These include individuals with a recognized disability (a health condition that lasts longer than six months) and those of you who are medically fragile. Health conditions can include chemical sensitivities, anxiety conditions, including claustrophobia, and more.

Knowing your rights during this time is important and necessary.

2. You have the right to receive and review a copy of your school's new policies. This has also been a stressful time for school administrators and district personnel as they struggle to comply with what seem to be ever-changing guidelines. Most schools have implemented strict sanitation policies and some require PPE. Regardless of the policies in place, you should obtain a copy and review the changes. Some policies will pertain directly to you and may require

you to make specific efforts to sanitize your classroom and materials.

3. You have the right to use leave under certain circumstances. Even without a disability that warrants accommodation, if you have a serious health condition that is temporary in nature, you have the right to use leave. This could include everything from sick leave, to FMLA, to short-term disability.

4. You have the right to confidentiality. Schools that are taking temperatures or other steps that require obtaining information about you are required to keep that information confidential. Your temperature or health conditions should be subject to strict confidentiality.

5. You have the right to legal assistance and support. We recognize that this is a stressful time for all. We are here to help guide you in your return to school. Do not hesitate to call on AAE Legal Services should you need assistance. ■



Sharon Nelson is the senior director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. In this capacity, Ms. Nelson oversees AAE's legal services team and works daily with members and panel counsel to address members' legal concerns. A passionate advocate for educators, Ms. Nelson has been a lawyer focusing on employee rights issues for more than twenty years.

AAE LEGAL SERVICES

You will receive caring, professional support and direct contact with our legal team for confidential advice with no conflicts of interest.



☎ 800.704.7799 ✉ contactlegal@aaeteachers.org

What We Know about Online Learning

This past spring, school changed suddenly and drastically for students and teachers alike. Teachers who were used to teaching in classrooms suddenly had to shift their lessons online and were left playing catch-up.

While we don't know exactly what school will look like in the fall, many districts are already preparing for some or all of the learning to take place in an online environment. Knowing this ahead of time means that we can start planning now to make our learning as effective as possible.

The only question remaining is what that will look like. Teachers know that much of what went on this spring wasn't effective, but what does good online learning look like?

What the Research Says

In 2010 the U.S. Department of Education did a comprehensive meta-analysis surrounding the research about online learning in the K-12 classroom. While much in the report isn't of interest to the classroom teacher, some things do stand out. The research found that quality online courses did not need to be flashy, they all included a way for students to collaborate and communicate with each other — ideally in real time, gave individual students control over the pace of instruction, and provided highly individualized feedback. These findings mirror a literature review conducted by iNACOL (now the

Aurora Institute) that found collaborative, project-based assignments and a supportive environment that still provided for student independence were correlated with high-quality online instruction.

A more recent meta-analysis by the organization Quality Matters looked at what constituted a high-quality online instructor. That study found that understanding instruction design methods and focusing on quality communication were correlated with quality teaching.

How to Use This Information

Moving forward into the new school year, all educators should be prepared to spend some of it completely virtual. Even if your district announces in-person classes, that could change if there's a spike in illnesses. With that in mind, educators should design their courses so that they can be quickly and easily switched to an online environment.

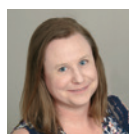
In online environments, it's clear that quality curriculum and assignments matter. That can begin over the summer by reviewing your material through the lens of Backward Design and Universal Design for Learning.

New material can be taught through assigned reading or, even better,

through the use of video. This will allow students to control the pace and review the material as often as they need. This will also allow the instructor to make sure the instruction is communicated in a succinct, clear, and understandable manner.

Since face-to-face time will be precious and possibly interrupted with little warning through the fall, educators can spend that time allowing students to discuss issues or interact with each other in meaningful ways that will help build the collaboration that students need to stay engaged in the course. Assignments can also encourage students to collaborate on their own time, even if digitally. However, remember that feedback and assessment should always be done individually.

Teachers in more linear course structures, like science or mathematics, may wish to consider mastery or competency-based learning as the course structure to hang their lessons on, while teachers in courses like language arts or social studies may encourage students to follow their passions when it comes to reading, writing, and research. Either way would allow students to self-direct the pace of their learning and still include discussion in larger groups. ■



Melissa Pratt is AAE's senior professional programs manager. She is responsible for creating and managing programs that help AAE members increase their professional capacity. Prior to AAE, Melissa taught science and social studies to middle school students in both public and private schools.

AAE Foundation COVID-19 Relief Program Winners

CCOVID-19 and pandemic-related school closures touched almost every school and the entire education community nationwide. AAE Foundation realized the magnitude of closure ramifications and how emergency distance learning was going to expose gaps and fragility in providing equitable education. This special cycle of scholarship and grant funding of up to \$500 for each recipient was an opportunity to help educators with urgently needed funds during school closures and for the challenges that lie ahead.

“With many districts and states facing education funding freezes and looming budget shortfalls, we saw the need to respond swiftly to educators’ concerns regarding the unplanned challenges associated with digital instruc-

tion and distance learning such as additional materials, content, and training needed during the school closures,” said AAE Foundation Executive Director Colin Sharkey. “We received an impressive array of proposals to support literacy, arts, and STEM instruction at home as well as professional development training opportunities that will provide new skills for maximizing student learning in schools that are expected to look considerably different when they reopen.”

The COVID-19 Relief Program, originally scheduled to end on May 15, 2020, was extended by fifteen days to accommodate the high volume of submissions. From hundreds of submissions, we congratulate the following award recipients:



Mr. David Dillard, an elementary educator in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has purchased a complete set of video recording equipment to record lessons and tutorials for educators at all grade levels at the school.



Ms. Alexis Engelken, a music educator in Chase, Kansas, is purchasing instruments so her students can continue their music instruction despite a spending freeze at the school.



Ms. Suchada Thepchatri, a mathematics educator in Brookhaven, Georgia, is purchasing twenty-five Chromebook cases.



Ms. Kelly Cadman, a mathematics educator in Douglasville, Georgia, has purchased technology-based mathematics programing and materials.



Ms. Sarah Sandberg, an art educator in Trafalgar, Indiana, is purchasing art supplies for her entire middle school art program to offset anticipated substantial arts education funding reductions in the fall.



Ms. Jamie Yung, an arts, drama, and music educator in Independence, Missouri, is purchasing tools for her high school’s scenic shop.



Ms. LeAnn Helms, a high school principal in Manila, Arkansas, is creating a Back-to-School event for the senior class of 2021 that will become a back-to-school tradition for generations of future senior classes at the school.



Ms. Melissa Hunt, an English language educator in Blackfoot, Idaho, is purchasing materials to assemble grab-and-go book bags to provide at-home and grade-appropriate reading materials for rural students who do not have access to digital or printed books.



Ms. Krista Palmer, a mathematics educator in Paterson, New Jersey, will use her scholarship to attend a professional development session at the Ron Clark Academy.



Ms. Regina Sackman, an educator in Mansfield, Ohio, is using her grant to develop an understanding of trauma in students through an all-staff study program of the book *A Teacher’s Guide to Trauma*.



How would you use a \$500 teacher scholarship or classroom grant?

Apply today! The next deadline is **OCTOBER 1, 2020.**

7 Steps to Sending Kids Back to Elementary School and Parents Back to Work

All over the country, states, districts, and task forces of every sort are wrestling with the question of how to safely reopen schools. This scenario planning is daunting, as schools must navigate a minefield of health, safety, legal, and instructional issues, and do so blindfolded by our ever-changing yet imperfect understanding of the virus itself. The AEI “blueprint for back to school” does an excellent job spelling out the major considerations that leaders must take into account, but it stops short of providing specific advice.

With the hope of moving the conversation forward a bit more, here’s my attempt to do that for elementary schools, informed by some of the country’s leading educators, lessons from “early reopeners” around the globe, and the newly released CDC guidance. I’ll consider how social distancing might look, how schedules might work, and other logistical questions currently keeping leaders up at night.

First, though, let me be clear about the three assumptions driving these suggestions.

1. I assume that the goal of social distancing measures in schools is to mitigate the spread of the virus—and avoid any “super spreader” events—not to reduce to zero the risk of transmission. Even if local communities are not experiencing major outbreaks, the virus will still be out there, and will likely find its way into some schools. The goal, then, is to keep any contagion to a minimum, while protecting those children and adults who are most vulnerable.
2. I assume that we cannot ignore the economic imperative of allowing parents to go back to work—which is important in its own right and will help children by alleviating poverty. Thus, plans that require young children to remain at home during the traditional school day (every other day or in mornings or afternoons) are nonstarters, though remaining at home must remain an option.
3. I assume that plans must be affordable. While additional resources would create new possibilities for coping with this crisis, the political appetite for that appears to be slim to none. In fact, schools will probably have to find ways to practice social distancing while also coping with major budget cuts, as outrageous and unfair as that might be.

With those three assumptions in mind, here are seven steps toward the successful reopening of elementary schools:

1. Give students and educators the choice of full-time remote learning for the 2020–21 school year. This is a moral and legal imperative, as some children, families, and educators have underlying health conditions that put them at high risk of serious illness or worse from COVID-19. Plus, some families will simply feel more comfortable keeping their kids quarantined until there is a vaccine, or may prefer the remote learning model to the in-person variety, especially given the modifications that will be necessary. And the more students that stay home, the easier it will be to implement social distancing for the others.

2. Shift to an every-other-day schedule for fourth and fifth graders, while allowing kindergarten through third graders to attend school every weekday. Younger students cannot be left at home alone, so they need to be at school if their parents or other caregivers are going to be able to go to work. Plus, given their maturity level and limited reading skills, they are least equipped to learn much independently. (See #3 for how grades K–3 could attend daily and still do social distancing.)

3. Keep all classrooms to 50 percent capacity, and don’t allow student groups to mix. This is where each school will have to work out its own logistical puzzle. The first key factor (as mentioned in #1) is how many students continue with full-time remote learning. The more who do, the easier this challenge becomes. The second is the physical layout of the elementary school. How many classrooms or other spaces are available that would allow for groups of ten to twelve students, and an adult, to maintain social distance? (This may include gyms and cafeterias that could be subdivided, plus art and music rooms.) The third is the school’s staffing model. How many instructional staff beyond classroom teachers work at the school? How many could be hired, so as to oversee groups of students when their classroom teachers are with the other half of the class? Are volunteers available?

4. Run buses at 50 percent capacity or less. If lots of families choose the full-time online option, and fourth and fifth graders attend school every other day, this should be doable. However, schools may want to encourage parents to consider walking, biking, or

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Seven Steps to Sending Kids Back to Elementary School and Parents Back to Work

driving their kids to school, too, at least in communities where that is feasible.

5. Mask up, screen everyone, wash those hands, and tell everyone to stay home if sick! The evidence is mounting that masks can significantly reduce the spread of the coronavirus. And making little kids wear masks is more likely to succeed than keeping them at least six feet apart from one another. Schools should start looking for manufactured or homemade masks for students who need them. (The CDC guidance only suggests mask-wearing for adults.) Frequent hand washing is also critical, and will need to be managed tightly so that restrooms don't become a source of contagion. That means setting a strict schedule for bathroom breaks for every class, and sticking to it. Cleaning regimes will need to be intensified. And needless to say, schools should have a zero-tolerance policy about coming to school with any sort of illness. As the CDC guidance indicates, it will be essential to screen students and staff every day for symptoms or signs of exposure.

6. Use a mix of “man-to-man” and “zone coverage” when it comes to teaching. As mentioned above, children should be in the same group of ten or twelve students at all times, except when they are on the bus. And they should stay in the same physical location at all times too, except for recess. Teachers and other staff, meanwhile, should circulate to provide the necessary instruction to students. (However, they must be extremely careful to maintain social distancing to avoid circulating the virus themselves!)

7. Have a clear plan ready to go if an outbreak occurs. If these suggestions are implemented with fidelity, it should significantly reduce the risk of a “super-spreader” event. However, it won't eliminate the possibility of a student or staff member bringing the virus to school and infecting others.

If someone in the school community tests positive for COVID-19, public health officials will likely require the school to close for deep cleaning. Students or staff who have come in contact with the infected person will also be tested and quarantined at home. Still, local public health officials may want the school closed for two weeks or longer—especially if there's a flare up in the larger community, so schools need to be prepared to go back to full-time, online learning for everyone. For better or worse, that's something with which they now have a lot of experience.

These seven steps are not the Ten Commandments. As we learn more about the virus and good ideas evolve from schools, systems, and other sources, we will update these accordingly. ■

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