

REOPENING RESILIENT SCHOOLS

With a hybrid learning model and proper safeguards, schools can successfully open

A CONSENSUS IS GROWING among health officials that American schools, virtually all of which closed their doors this March, will be able to reopen in the fall. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in early June that “the idea of keeping schools closed in the fall because of safety concerns for children might be ‘a bit of a reach.’”

That’s good news: the sooner kids get back to school, the sooner K–12 educators can begin to address the student-learning losses that have surely resulted from the closures. Reopening the schools is also vital to reopening businesses as part of the economic recovery. But the prospect of restarting is likely a source of anxiety for educators, given the sheer number of decisions they need to make and their concerns about the health and safety of students, school employees, and the extended

BY JOHN BAILEY



A student at the Sainte-Croix elementary school works as half of her writing desk is marked with a tape to ensure that safe distance is kept on May 15, 2020, in Hannut, Belgium.



community. Fauci's counterpart at the Centers for Disease Control, Robert Redfield, warns that we all need to be ready for a resurgence of the virus next winter that could "actually be even more difficult than the one we just went through" and force a second round of closures.

The school-reopening guidance offered by the CDC naturally focuses on public-health considerations, leaving it to educators to devise how to keep students and staff safe while also meeting students' educational needs. Even if public officials deem it safe for schools to reopen, as seems likely, some parents will still hesitate to send their children back to school, and some educators—those whose age or health conditions place them at risk—may not be in a position to return. What's more, school leaders may well be working with tighter budgets owing to the economic shutdowns as well as increased costs associated with accommodating the CDC measures.

These challenges and disruptions are forcing school leaders and communities to review every facet of education—including the inequities that have stubbornly persisted in the system but have been exposed during Covid-19. The May 25 killing of

who were hurt the most academically by the closing of schools are black and low-income students. If black lives matter, then surely black students' education matters, too. Too many of these young people were already struggling in a system that was not serving them well. Sending these students back to "school as normal" will mean going back to continually failing them.

The rethinking of schooling that was forced by the pandemic can serve as an opportunity to introduce some long-overdue reforms and improvements to better serve students, particularly students of color. The task ahead of us is not reopening schools as normal but building an education system that is more resilient and equitable.

Is It Safe to Reopen Schools?

This central question is hard to answer definitively, because scientists are still trying to understand how the virus transmits, whether it is seasonal, and if reinfection is possible. Some children are asymptomatic even when testing positive for the virus. Schools will need to begin their preparations based on the best current understanding of the virus and then modify their plans as new knowledge comes to light.

There are four primary medical questions relevant to schools' planning efforts, the answers to which will come from medical studies as well as the experiences of schools that reopened abroad in May:

How at-risk are children to Covid-19? The scientific community generally agrees that coronavirus poses minimal risk for children under the age of 18. An American Academy of Pediatrics report stated that "the preponderance of evidence" indicates children are less likely to be symptomatic, have severe disease, or transmit Covid-19. An evaluation of research by the United Kingdom's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies concluded with a high degree of confidence that the severity of disease is lower in children than in adults. Another meta-analysis of 45 studies concluded that children account for only 1 to 5 percent of cases and "they often have milder disease than adults and deaths have been extremely rare."

Can children transmit Covid-19 to others? This question is not yet settled, but growing evidence suggests that they may not be very infectious. Ireland's Health Information and Quality Authority analyzed seven studies and concluded that "children are not, to date, substantially contributing to the household transmission of SARS-CoV-2." A 2020 study of children in New South Wales, Australia, also found that children seemed to transmit the virus less often than



The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Redfield

George Floyd by police in Minneapolis has triggered an enormous public response and prompted a moment of reckoning. This moment poses uncomfortable questions for an education system where only 19 percent of black students are proficient in reading and 16 percent are proficient in math. In Minneapolis, 43 percent of black students never graduate from high school. Against this backdrop, early indications are that the students

they do other respiratory viruses, such as influenza.

The Irish Health Service Executive studied school closures in Ireland and came to the conclusion that “children are not emerging as considerable drivers of transmission of COVID-19. . . . These findings suggest that schools are not a high risk setting for transmission of COVID-19 between pupils or between staff and pupils.” The agency suggested the “reopening of schools should be considered as an early rather than a late measure in the lifting of restriction.”

There are some researchers who disagree. One study conducted by German scientists suggested that children may indeed be as infectious as adults. Several countries also experienced isolated spikes of Covid-19 cases in some areas after schools started up again.

Sorely needed additional research is forthcoming. In the United States, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, which is part of the National Institutes of Health, is studying 6,000 people, both children and their families, from 11 cities over the course of six months to better understand how Covid-19 spreads among children and adults. These findings, and results from others like it, will help inform better decisionmaking going forward.

What precautionary measures are needed to protect students and school personnel? Decisionmakers in the United States can learn from the experiences of schools in China, South Korea, France, Denmark, Germany, and the UK that all reopened under health measures recommended by government agencies. Guidance included increasing the space between desks, limiting the use of playgrounds and cafeterias, and encouraging teachers to wear masks. In May, the CDC provided initial guidance for U.S. schools that included many of these measures as well as physical distancing, limiting student movement within buildings, and conducting daily health screenings of students and faculty. These accommodations will create challenges, since they will require rethinking class schedules, school operations, busing, and the use of other school spaces.

How do we assess risk in the months ahead? State and local officials imposed statewide closures and shelter-in-place orders this spring because they lacked more refined forecasting tools that could have suggested more targeted interventions. Most of the models used then could only show where the virus had been, but new models from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, Carnegie Mellon University, and the CDC are projecting where it is heading.

The model from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington aims to show where disease curves are within a state and to project where they might be moving in coming weeks, to help determine the most effective measures for controlling the spread of the coronavirus.

Carnegie Mellon’s COVIDcast displays real-time information

on symptoms, doctor visits, medical tests, surveys administered through Facebook, and Internet searches from Google related to Covid-19, including estimated disease activity at the county level. The leading and lagging indicators produced by this model could help forecast additional waves of the virus.

The CDC is working to develop better estimates using 13 different models to develop a consensus forecast. The resulting chart looks like the “spaghetti” models used in forecasting

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hurricane paths. All of these research initiatives will lead to more nuanced and localized actions in the fall in place of the blunt statewide actions previously imposed.

Reopening Resilient Schools

School leaders and policymakers do not have the luxury of waiting for better research and forecasts to begin their planning. Instead, they will need to create plans that can change over time and develop the organizational capabilities to quickly evaluate new guidance and translate it into practice. It is this ability to adapt that creates the resiliency needed when confronting uncertainty and changing circumstances.

In May, the American Enterprise Institute brought together a bipartisan group of 21 former federal officials (spanning the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations), state school chiefs, charter-school leaders, and superintendents with experience leading through moments of crisis. Their charge was to think through broad areas that school leaders and policymakers would need to consider before they could reopen schools safely and responsibly. The result was a “blueprint” touching on several issues, including: school operations; supports for the whole child; protecting school personnel; addressing academic challenges; and improving distance education. It also stresses the importance of communication with parents, educators, and community members.

Communication and Collaboration

Above all else, the fluidity of the crisis requires close collaboration among state policymakers, school leaders, public-health officials, and community leaders. Schools can open only when local and state health officials say it is safe to do so. The same public-health officials, in coordination with governors, mayors, and school leaders, should be the ones who determine if closures are needed in the coming school year in response to a local outbreak. Communicating with parents is also paramount, and

families should know who will make decisions, and how.

Schools will need to work with state and local health officials in developing plans for contact tracing and other disease surveillance, much as they have during flu season when student absenteeism and sickness are reported. This reporting is particularly important for public-health data, as the information could reactivate social-distancing measures within a community.

It's also important for educators to communicate with parents through channels beyond their school websites. According to a May 2020 survey conducted by Learning Heroes, 80 percent of parents say texting is the most effective form of communication for them, but only 28 percent say teachers use it. Teachers and administrators can use a two-way messaging service such as Remind to communicate with all parents or students or a specific group, such as students who

tuition and other options, could extend that benefit to families who decide not to send their child back to school. States participating in the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program could give extra dollars to low-income families through debit cards they could use at grocery stores to supplement school meals. States offering Course Access programs, which allow individual students to take online courses from a variety of providers, could leverage these catalogs to expand offerings for students continuing in remote learning. This could be an opportunity for states to develop reciprocity agreements that allow students in one state to take courses approved in another state.

Rethinking School Operations

CDC and state guidelines will necessitate new health and safety measures in schools, among them: procuring masks for faculty and extra cleaning supplies; figuring out the most efficient way to do temperature screenings of students before they enter the school; building in extra time to accommodate handwashing and additional cleaning of classrooms; having students eat in their classrooms rather than in the cafeteria; and renovating bathrooms to install CDC-recommended physical barriers between sinks and urinals.

Precautionary measures must also extend to school activities. The Texas Education Agency guidance recommends suspending certain student activities that may accelerate the spread of Covid-19, such as choir, wind ensembles, and indoor sports. The Sports Medicine Advisory Committee of the National Federation of State High School Associations issued new guidelines for high-school athletics, including categorizing sports by level of risk, depending on how much physical contact each entails. Football and wrestling, for example, are higher-risk sports, basketball and baseball involve moderate risk, and running and swimming pose lower risk.

Some of the new technology deployed for learning or safety will present privacy and ethical questions for school leaders. For instance, district leaders will need to review online services and digital tools for compliance with state and federal privacy laws. Additional issues emerge with various contact-tracing technologies. Schools in New Albany, Ohio, are considering a contact-tracing program that has students wearing bluetooth-enabled bracelets that track their locations throughout the day, where they sit in classrooms, and whom they encounter.



Knox County Schools worker Lonnie Johnson sanitizes the cafeteria with an electrostatic sprayer at Brickey-McCloud Elementary in Knoxville, Tenn., on Friday, March 13, 2020.

haven't completed an assignment. Schools can also use such platforms to conduct parent surveys and have families check in throughout the year.

State policymakers can find ways to take advantage of policy tools that are available in their state. States that offer education savings accounts, such as Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts or Florida's Gardiner Scholarship Program, which allow parents to receive public money for private-school

This technology could provide some preventive-health benefits, but it also poses a number of ethical questions, including who will be required to seek and provide consent, and at what age children themselves will be asked to consent. What happens if a child or caregiver refuses to comply with surveillance programs? By engaging parents and advocates early in the process, school leaders can prepare themselves to address such thorny issues.

Supporting the Whole Child

School leaders will have to consider the social and emotional needs of students as they return to school. The RAND Corporation and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning both have guides to assist schools with selecting the best social-emotional assessments for their students. A number of state reopening plans, such as those from Ohio, Maryland, and Louisiana, provide detailed guidance and resources to support social and emotional health.

In lower-income districts, leaders might consider adopting a program such as Communities In Schools, which helps schools serve as a hub for the coordination of various social services offered in their neighborhoods. Active in 2,300 schools, this national program provides students and their families with a single point of contact at school to coordinate screening and referrals for services such as healthcare, food and clothing, tutoring, and mental health, with the aim of “surrounding students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school.”

Offering robust counseling services in school can help students deal with the trauma that results from the deaths of friends and family members, economic hardship from a parent losing his or her job, or abuse, violence, or neglect at home. The isolation brought about by social distancing can also exacerbate children’s depression and anxiety. A May 2020 survey by Echelon Insights revealed that nearly 30 percent of parents believed their children experienced higher anxiety and more mental health challenges, including depression, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Telemedicine offers the opportunity to supplement school nurses and counselors through virtual clinics. Hazel Health, for example, partners with schools to enable students to receive immediate care through telemedicine by connecting with one of the service’s network doctors. Manatee offers online mental-health options for students and their families. Through telemedicine, schools can scale up services quickly while also continuing to offer them during periods of remote learning.

Protecting Vulnerable School Personnel

Data collection on Covid-19 shows that older populations are disproportionately vulnerable to disease severity. The CDC found that individuals over 55 account for more than 92 percent of all Covid-19 deaths in the United States. Another

CDC analysis found that those over 65 made up 45 percent of hospitalizations and 53 percent of admissions to intensive care associated with Covid-19.

The CDC recommends that older people—as well as those with preexisting health conditions—remain sheltered in place even as social distancing measures are relaxed. This advice poses a significant challenge for schools, given that as many as 646,000 public and private school teachers might be unable to return to the classroom because of their risk profile (see Figure 1). The number is likely higher if one counts other school personnel, such as school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, and other support staff.

A *USA Today*/IPSOS poll conducted in May reported that

Four surveys found that parents believe their children are spending less time on their schoolwork (40 percent of parents) and are learning less (46 percent of parents) than they normally would.

one in five teachers say they are unlikely to go back to school if their classrooms reopen in the fall, owing to health concerns. The Connecticut Education Association surveyed its members and reported in June 2020 that a staggering 43 percent of them are at higher risk for severe illness from Covid-19 because of age or underlying health conditions.

Schools will need to find new roles for these teachers, perhaps as online instructors or tutors. When school closures shut down high-school AP instruction, the College Board created AP online classes and review sessions taught by AP teachers from around the country. States could take a similar approach by using their at-home teachers to develop videos, create online content, or serve as online mentors and tutors. Utah is exploring “shared delivery” of instruction, pairing a teacher who is adept at digital teaching with one who performs better in the classroom. Other teachers could find new roles through technology platforms such as Outschoool, Weekdays, and BetterLesson, which help match available teaching talent to online and offline opportunities.

Administrators may also want to offer early-retirement incentives for teachers who are uncomfortable with teaching online or are nearing retirement age. State policymakers should consider certification reforms to make it easier for schools to recruit out-of-state substitutes and teachers.

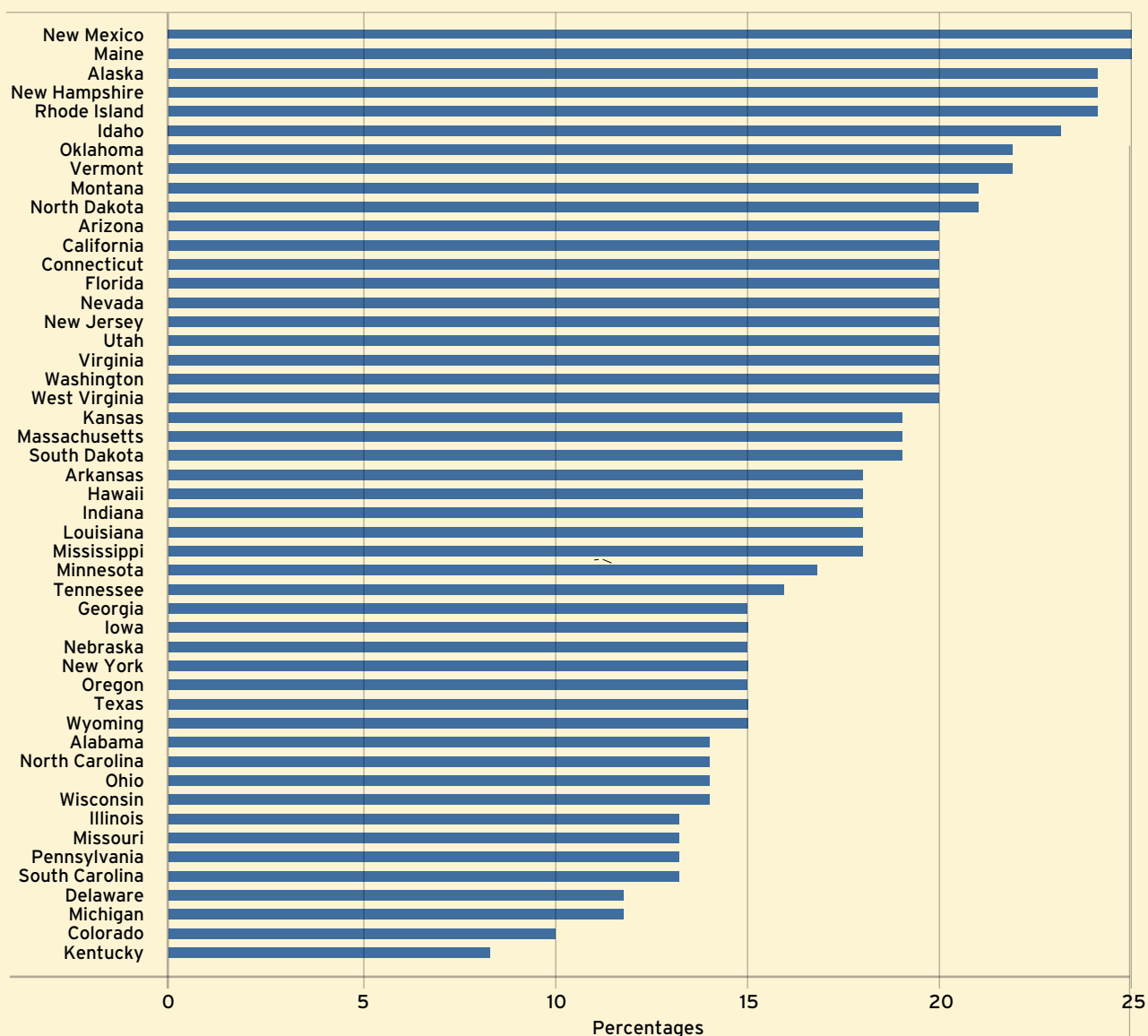
Finally, given all the ways teaching will have to change in the coming year, district leaders and teachers unions will need to work together to review their labor agreements. As part of California’s response to Covid-19 school closures, Governor Gavin Newsom’s office facilitated an agreement among teachers

Which States Have the Highest Percentage of “At-Risk” Teachers?

(Figure 1)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, older adults seem to be at a higher risk for developing serious complications from Covid-19. New Mexico and Maine have the highest percentage of teachers over the age of 55 at a full quarter of the workforce. In Kentucky, on the other hand, just 8 percent of teachers are over 55.

Percentage of public-school teachers age 55 and older by state



NOTE: Maryland is not included as the response rate was below 50 percent, and reporting standards were therefore not met.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey, “Average and median age of public school teachers and percentage distribution of teachers by age category, sex, and state: 2017–18”

unions, classified employees, school boards, superintendents, and principals to use a specific framework to “work together on matters of labor and management to minimize any impact to students—including direction on implementation and delivery of distance learning, special education, and meals through the end of the school year.” Similar work could help accelerate the reopening of schools in other states.

Addressing Academic Challenges

The disruption of the school year clearly interrupted student learning, particularly for those who were most vulnerable beforehand. A growing body of research suggests many students will start the new school year far behind where they would normally be.

Four surveys of parents conducted between April 27 and May 20 consistently found that parents believe their children are spending less time on their schoolwork (40 percent of parents) and are learning less (46 percent of parents) than they normally would. McKinsey estimates the instructional disruptions caused by Covid-19 led to nearly 7 months of lost learning on average, with black students losing 10 months and

low-income students losing as much as a year.

New research from Opportunity Insights concurs. Researchers analyzed data on 800,000 students who use the online math program Zearn. Comparing usage patterns before and after school closures, they found that by late April, student participation had

Fifty-two percent of high-income parents reported that their children were having live lessons as part of remote instruction, compared to just 38 percent of parents in families making less than \$50,000.

fallen by about 48 percent among students from low-income zip codes and by about 25 percent among students from middle-income zip codes, while participation had increased by about 10 percent among those from high-income zip codes (see Figure 2). In specific states and locations, however, low-income students are doing as much math as higher-income students, suggesting that school culture and expectations are important in shaping student outcomes. And the overall number of visits to the Zearn platform rose sharply this spring (see Figure 3).

Summer school offers one way to help students catch up. The Center on Reinventing Public Education reports that, as of June 3, 61 school districts out of a nonrepresentative sample of 100 planned to offer summer school to at least some grade levels, 5 were not offering summer school, and 34 had yet to announce their plans. In South Carolina, the state department of education plans to offer four-week academic recovery camps providing 25,000 kindergarten-to-3rd-grade students with literacy and math instruction, along with support in social-emotional learning. Instead of summer school, Miami-Dade County Schools plans to start school a month earlier for students who struggled the most with online learning.

In initiating the health measures recommended by the CDC, schools will have to think creatively about class schedules to provide the physical distancing needed for buses and classrooms. A recent plan published by the American Federation of Teachers recommended



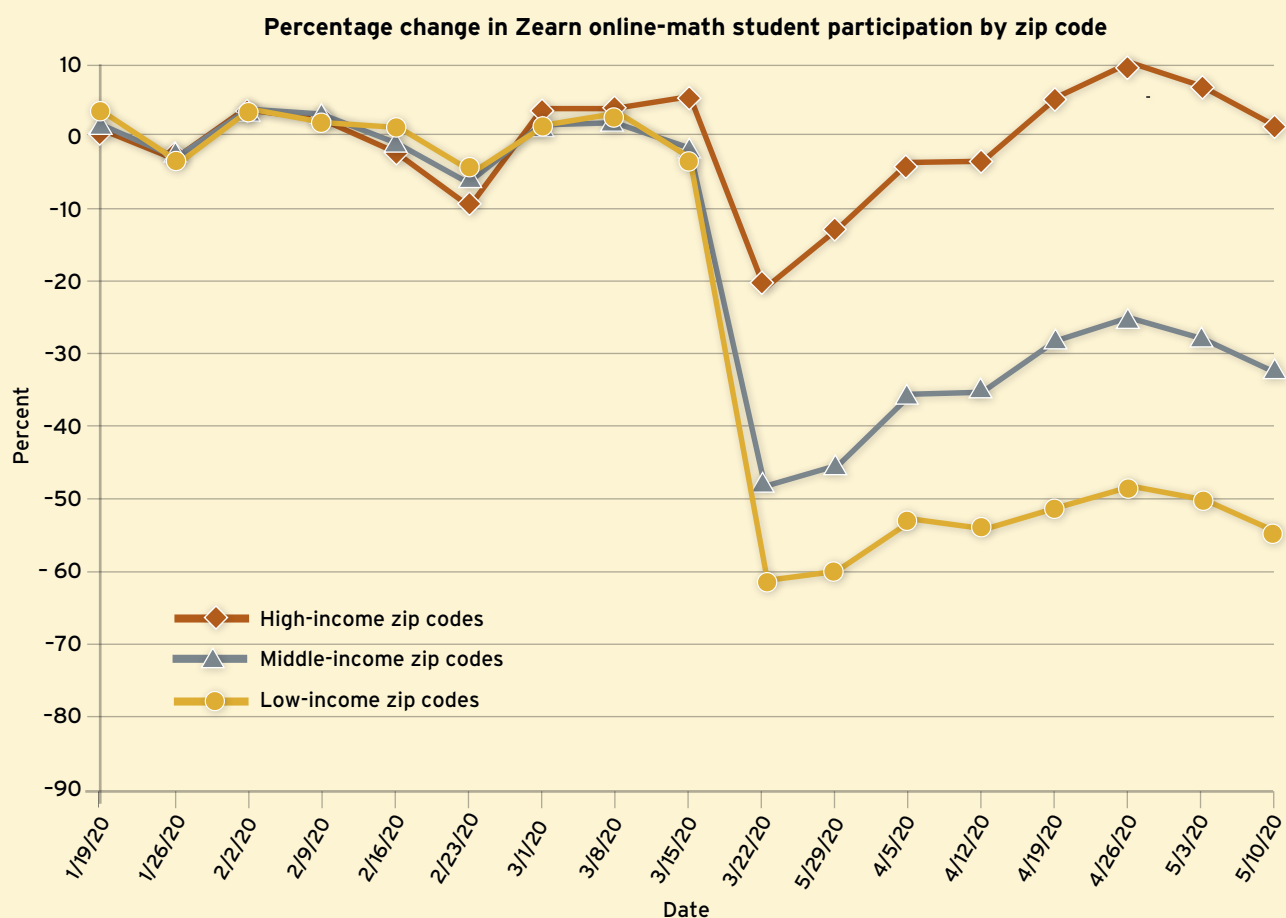
A mother wearing a mask holds her two children outside of NYU Langone Health hospital during the nightly “Clap Because We Care” cheer for medical staff and essential workers.

ALEXI ROSENFELD/GETTY IMAGES

A Drop-Off in Online Participation, Especially for Low-Income Students

(Figure 2)

Since January 2020, student participation in online math coursework on the Zearn Math platform has decreased among existing student users. Usage has gone down most dramatically in low-income zip codes, dropping 48.3 percent in late April relative to January (before school closures). The sharpest dip for all household-income categories occurred between the week ending on March 15 and the week ending on March 22; a national emergency was declared on March 13.



NOTE: Percent change is the change in active students using the Zearn Math online curriculum, calculated from online-usage data. Data is limited to existing school users.

SOURCE Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker, "Online Math Participation"

that schools consider a "split schedule" that alternates days of the week or times of the day students attend school. Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an executive editor of *Education Next*, has suggested this could lead to high schools looking more like colleges. Some students might have an every-other-day schedule, where they attend class in person on some days and work from home or participate in apprenticeships on other days.

In the case of younger children, though, unconventional school schedules could wreak havoc with parents' work lives.

Several states are beginning to think through the various ways an altered schedule might take shape. For example, Maryland's reopening plan offers five options for school districts to consider, including various one- or two-day rotations of in-school learning alternating with distance education.

Educators can use diagnostic assessments to better understand where students stand academically and inform strategies to help them catch up. State assessments could be repurposed into optional diagnostic tools. Texas, for example, offered a diagnostic assessment using questions from the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. Louisiana has also made

variations among states, with parents in New Jersey reporting nearly 6.8 hours while parents in West Virginia reported less than a single hour. According to Echelon Insights, only 46 percent of parents reported their child's receiving live instruction. Socioeconomic differences were apparent, with 52 percent of high-income parents reporting that their children were having live lessons, compared to just 38 percent of parents in families making less than \$50,000.

A USA Today/Ipsos survey conducted in May 2020 found that if schools reopened in the fall, more than half of parents with a school-aged child would be likely to switch to at-home learning.

a range of diagnostic assessments available to its schools.

If another wave of Covid-19 sweeps through communities, schools may once again have to close and return to remote learning. It will be imperative that schools develop better plans for students with special needs and English-language learners. One approach used in Israel was to open schools for special-needs students while other students participated in remote learning. Since there were fewer students in the building, students with special needs could more easily abide by social-distancing rules and get the individualized support and therapies they needed.

Improving Distance Education

Over the summer, school leaders have the opportunity to collect feedback from parents, teachers, and students to learn what worked and what didn't in the spring to help inform their plans for the fall. While it may have worked for some, remote learning seems to have fallen short of fully satisfying most students, parents, and teachers. On the 2020 *Education Next* survey, the parents of only 28 percent of students said they were "very satisfied" with the instruction provided by their child's school during the shutdown.

What's more, most of the distance learning may not have involved live instruction from teachers. The Census Household Pulse Survey conducted the first week of June found that only 3.4 hours out of seven days were spent on live virtual contact between students and their teachers. There are massive

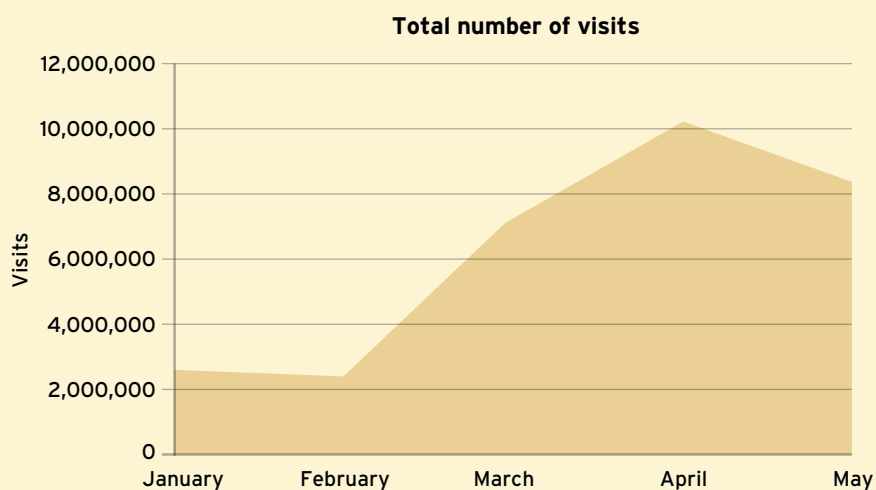
The key to improving distance learning is focusing on the fundamentals. Eva Moskowitz of Success Academy Charter Schools advised, "This is a time for simplicity and being careful not to throw in too many bells and whistles." The charter network focused on maintaining its core principles as it switched to a remote setting. The most effective lecturers across the network delivered live instruction, with other teachers

providing small-group discussions. This latter group of teachers also monitored student progress on assignments and offered tutoring sessions for those falling behind.

Some schools might consider transitioning to a blended-learning model, which combines the most useful online technology with the most effective in-classroom activities. Thomas Arnett from the Christensen Institute recommends two models that combine in-person and remote learning. In an "enriched virtual"

Overall Growth Despite Decline Among Existing Users (Figure 3)

Even as usage for preexisting Zearn students has gone down, the total number of visits to the platform has increased, hitting a high point of more than 10 million visits in April.



SOURCE: SimilarWeb

model, students complete the majority of coursework online at home and come to school a few times each week to participate in group discussions and exercises managed by a teacher. In a “flipped classroom” arrangement, students watch lectures and complete online coursework at home and then come to school for teacher-guided practice or projects.

Of course, all of the remote-learning models depend on students being connected. Home Internet connectivity and learning devices have become the digital school buses that take students to their classes and instructors. Education Superhighway has produced a series of guides, budgeting

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tools, and resources to assist school districts and state policymakers with bridging the home-connectivity gap. It will be imperative, though, that federal policymakers provide the funding that can ensure all students, particularly those from low-income families or living in rural areas, have the devices and connectivity they need to access learning.

Preparing for Cautious Parents

The most difficult hurdle to reopening schools may be earning parents’ trust. Early experiences in the UK and France have shown that many parents are reluctant to send their children back to school, even when governments say it is safe.

The situation may not be better in the United States. A *USA Today/Ipsos* survey conducted in May 2020 found that if schools reopened in the fall, more than half of parents with a school-aged child would be likely to switch to at-home learning. Echelon Insights had similar findings in June, when only 27 percent of parents said they would feel comfortable sending their child back to school in August or September. More than 25 percent of nonwhite parents said the spring is the earliest they would feel comfortable. When Miami-Dade County Schools surveyed their parents, they found that only a third were ready to have their kids return, a third felt major hesitation, and another third were open to the possibility but wanted to know more about the safety precautions being taken.

The reality is that even if schools comply with everything the CDC recommends, some parents will still feel it is too risky to send their child back. Earning parents’ trust can only be done by actively engaging them in the planning process so they will feel invested in the resulting decisions.

According to a June 2020 survey from AEI, parents are three times more likely to trust the CDC than school boards and superintendents with information related to the health and

safety of reopening schools. They are more than six times more likely to trust state health officials than their school principal. For that reason, a health official should always be part of developing and communicating reopening plans. The Indiana State Department of Health is assigning a liaison to work directly with schools and the Department of Education with their reopening plans. Miami-Dade County Public Schools is creating a new Chief Health Officer position to coordinate efforts with state and local health officials as well as oversee the implementation across all schools in their system.

But even then, some parents will not feel safe until there is a vaccine, something likely still months away. Schools will need to plan for remote-learning options for these students. Parma City Schools in Ohio conducted a districtwide survey and found 110 out of 1,700 parents said they wouldn’t have their children return to school until a vaccine was available. The district is creating a virtual academy as an alternative for these students. Alabama is planning to give parents a choice between sending their children back to school or keeping them home, where they would receive online instruction.

Can Schools Really Do All of This?

Education leaders face immense challenges as they race to put together plans at the same time as they’re likely to face budget cuts. We should all acknowledge this and approach the reopening of schools with a measure of grace. It will be messy and imperfect.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching has produced a set of resources that provide guiding questions around different scenarios, including all students attending school in person, some students attending in person while others learn remotely, and all students learning remotely. The questions help tease out not only pragmatic responses, but also the equity issues presented under each scenario.

And perhaps that’s the real opportunity. In planning to reopen, schools will be forced to question long-standing assumptions and develop strategies that can lead to building a better education system. The process can help to distinguish between the superfluous and the essential and build from those fundamentals.

Beyond all else, the moment challenges us with renewed urgency to commit to building a system that serves all students. The students who will need the most help are those who have been systemically underserved for generations. Organizations rarely have the permission to rethink all their assumptions, structures, and systems. The Covid-19 crisis gives that permission to school systems to think differently and introduce long-needed changes and improvements. The real question is not can schools do this, but rather, how will schools rise to the challenge of the moment? Students are counting on us, and we must not fail them.

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