

The spring of 2020 will not soon be forgotten by educators, students, and families.

With the sudden shutdown of schools due to the threat of COVID-19, administrators scrambled to design and implement virtual learning, school meal distribution, and assessment plans.

Teachers abruptly pivoted to online platforms for instruction. Parents struggled to facilitate learning at home. Students were significantly impacted by the disruption to their typical education, loss of social interaction, and isolation at home. Young people suffered academically and emotionally.¹ And for students of color, those living in unsafe households, those with disabilities and special learning needs, and those with connectivity issues, the negative impact was even more pronounced.²

We are all eager to provide an improved academic experience for students this fall, and ideally, for a safe return to classroom instruction. As state and local leaders consider the reopening of schools, there are many important factors that should be considered. In addition to the necessary health and safety considerations of students and staff, it is critical to also address social-emotional and mental health, as well as the needs of specific student populations.



The Maine Department of Education recently released a Return to Classroom Instruction Framework.³ This framework is divided into five parts: physical health and safety; social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health; academic programs and student learning; common foundations for remote learning; and additional considerations. **The American Academy of Pediatrics** has also offered guidance,⁴ in support of prioritizing a return to in-classroom instruction in the fall, noting that, “based on the nation's experience this spring, remote learning is likely to result in severe learning loss and increased social isolation. Social isolation, in turn, can breed serious social, emotional and health issues. Furthermore, these impacts will

¹ Edutopia, Covid-19's Impact on Students' Academic and Mental Well-Being
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/covid-19s-impact-students-academic-and-mental-well-being>

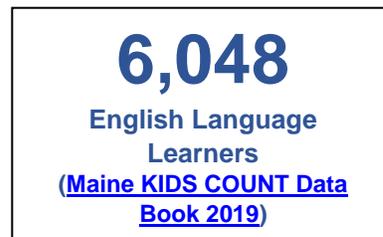
² The New York Times, Research Shows Students Falling Months Behind During Virus Disruptions
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/coronavirus-education-lost-learning.html>

³ Maine Department of Education, Framework for Reopening Schools and Returning to In-Person Instruction
<https://www.maine.gov/doe/framework>

⁴ The American Academy of Pediatrics, COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry
<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

be visited more severely on Black and brown children, as well as low-income children and those with learning disabilities.”

Given the ongoing presence of COVID-19 in our state, careful reopening plans should also prioritize in-person instruction for special populations. We should consider daily in-person instruction for our youngest students (k-5), and blended virtual and in-person models for middle and high school students, who are more comfortable with and capable of learning remotely. For those middle and high school students who fell most academically behind in the spring, and those with disabilities or other special needs, priority should be given to their full-time in-school participation, to ensure they receive the services they need to be supported academically.



Fortunately, there is a growing body of guidance available on best practices for a return to in-classroom instruction that also factors in the health and safety of students and staff.

For classrooms, these include: implementing smaller classroom sizes to enable social distancing, students working in cohorts to minimize contact with other students, teachers moving between classrooms rather than students to minimize movement within the school, and students and staff being encouraged to wear masks. To prevent large group gatherings, schools should consider staggering meal service times, or serve meals in classrooms. Outdoor play time should still be encouraged, but taken in smaller groups, and not include contact with playground equipment. Inside the school, procedures should be in place to ensure shared surfaces are sanitized regularly, and handwashing and sanitizing stations are made widely available to students entering and exiting shared spaces.

To the extent that remote learning models continue, schools should provide adequate training for their teachers, to ensure they can confidently facilitate virtual learning with students. Another consideration for remote learning plans is the availability of technology in the homes of students. While significant investment and improvement was made in the spring to facilitate broadband access for students learning remotely,⁵ it is also important that every student has access to their own iPad or laptop. Careful consideration, again, should be given to students at

⁵ Maine DOE Newsroom, Governor Mills Radio Address: Rising to meet an even greater challenge – distance learning amid COVID-19 <https://mainedoeneews.net/2020/05/19/governor-mills-radio-address-rising-to-meet-an-even-greater-challenge-distance-learning-amid-covid-19/>

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higher risk of being left behind in a remote learning setting, such as those who typically receive support services in schools.

82,073

School children
eligible for
subsidized school
meals
(KIDS COUNT, 2020)

Many students rely on schools for their hunger and nutrition needs, as well. In the event of blended or entirely remote learning plans for the fall, the state should request extensions in waivers that have allowed for more flexibility of meals delivery in the spring and summer, while schools were closed. Administrators should work to maintain bus delivery of meals to homes with children who rely on free and reduced meals or make them available for parents to pick up.

We must also prepare for the likelihood that some teachers and staff will opt not to return to classroom instruction, due to health concerns for themselves or family members. In Maine, the average age of a teacher is 55,⁶ putting many of them close to the “high-risk” category for contracting COVID-19. The state and MDOE should continue to prepare for the hiring of qualified substitutes, to fill vacancies when necessary. Districts will also need to prepare to hire additional bus drivers to meet the need for social distancing during bus transportation to and from schools.

While there will be guidance from MDOE, as well as from various national research and public health organizations on best practices for reopening, individual school districts will ultimately make the decision as to *how* their schools will reopen. Schools should ensure stakeholders are made part of this process, including the voices and experiences of administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders. Issues for consideration should include: safety and hygiene precautions, social-emotional and mental health supports, social distancing in transportation, school meals service, academic instruction, and the child care needs of families. It is important that districts provide their plans for reopening with transparency and clarity, so parents, students, and staff feel confident in their understanding of what a return to school will look like in the fall.



⁶ Maine Education Association, Public Schools, COVID-19 and the Road Ahead
<http://legislature.maine.gov/doc/4197>

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These new and uncharted territories in the operation of education in our state and in our country will most certainly require increased spending to implement⁷ – at the same time Maine faces looming budget shortfalls. Most certainly lawmakers will look to balance the budget in part by making cuts to state education spending. We need to respond with a firm, collective resolve that schools cannot be the places we look to make cuts in the year ahead. Now more than ever, students and families need the support of schools to help them navigate this public health and economic crisis, and schools will need our continued support to ensure they can continue this essential work in our communities.

⁷ Portland Press Herald, Cost of reopening schools during pandemic could exceed \$300 million
<https://www.pressherald.com/2020/06/30/cost-of-reopening-maine-k-12-schools-amid-pandemic-could-exceed-300-million/>