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6 Ways to Bring Students and Staff Back to Schools



—Getty

By Madeline Will

June 10, 2020

Assuming school buildings reopen this fall, it won't be business as usual.

Public health authorities—including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—recommend that schools maintain six feet of social distancing in classrooms and in common areas, such as hallways and cafeterias. This will be difficult, if not impossible, in many crowded school buildings, without some radical adjustments to school operations. **Transportation limitations** will also drive scheduling decisions.

For many school leaders, a hybrid approach of both in-person and remote instruction makes the most sense—but there are many ways that could work. There are pros and cons to every approach, and the flexibility districts have to alter their schedules will depend on state requirements.

To help district and school leaders make these high-stakes decisions, Education Week spoke to more than a dozen experts, including public health officials, education leaders and superintendents, to determine a list of a half-dozen potential models, some of which could be used simultaneously.

1. Phased Reopening

How it works: Schools bring back only some students at first to avoid crowding and make it easier to adhere to social distancing. For instance, schools could welcome back only one or two grade levels, while students in other grades continue to learn remotely. As conditions with the virus improve, schools can gradually welcome more students until they reach full capacity.

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4. Bubble Strategy

How it works: The same group of students stays together for all or most of the day, with the same teacher or teachers.

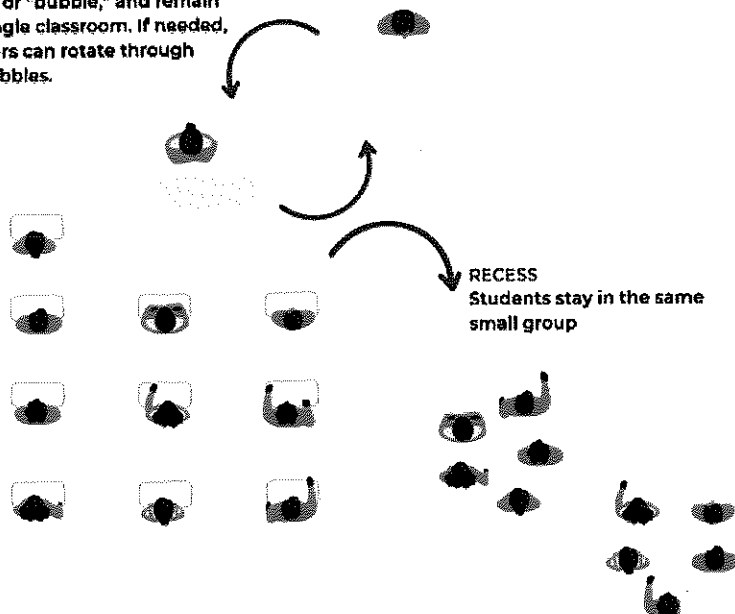
Students remain in a single classroom all day, even for lunch. If needed, different teachers rotate into the classroom while the students stay put. Younger students might forego electives, like art or physical education, or those teachers provide a lesson to the homeroom teacher. Students might also take those elective classes online, at home.

Pros: This is the CDC's recommended approach. If someone tests positive for COVID-19, the exposure to possible infection is limited to a smaller group, and contact tracing is easier to conduct.

Cons: Students are confined to a single space for extended periods. Classrooms may not be large enough to accommodate social distancing measures if the school's entire student body is in the building at once.

Limiting Exposure and Transmission

Students stay in the same small group, or "bubble," and remain in a single classroom. If needed, teachers can rotate through the bubbles.



SOURCE: Education Week reporting

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5. Cyclical Lockdown Strategy

How it works: School buildings regularly alternate between being open and closed with students staying home for a minimum of 10 days during closure periods. Students attend school one full week, followed by two weeks of remote learning at home.

Another version: Students come to school Monday through Thursday, and then learn from home on Friday and all days of the following week.

Pros: Research says this schedule would allow the virus to reach peak infectiousness during "at-home" weeks. While symptomatic carriers of the virus can be infectious longer than 10 days, the symptoms would be detected while people are under lockdown so they and other members of their household can remain isolated or self-quarantined. This may help limit unscheduled disruptions caused by a positive case or wider outbreak in the community.

Rob Miller, the superintendent of Bixby Public Schools near Tulsa, Okla., is leaning toward this strategy for the fall, although he won't make a final decision until closer to the start of the school year. He thinks it would mitigate exposure of the virus in the community, keep students academically engaged, and give families some predictability.

The local health department put it to him this way, Miller said: "It's virtually a guarantee that school in the first semester of next year will be disrupted. It's how do we want it to be disrupted?" He also thinks this approach will ease some of the pressures of social distancing, and schools can operate somewhat normally—with protective safety measures in place, such as masks for staff members and increased handwashing—during "on weeks."

Cons: Students will spend more time in remote learning environments than in school buildings receiving in-person instruction. For working parents with younger children, childcare may be challenging to arrange on such an unconventional schedule.

6. Year-Round Schedule

How it works: The school divides students into groups—one cohort attends school for a set period, roughly nine weeks, while the other cohorts participate in remote learning. The groups would rotate at the end of each period. Breaks from schooling would be more frequent, but shorter than the traditional 10-week summer vacation.

Pros: This keeps students from falling behind academically with no extended breaks from formal teaching and learning. Builds in scheduling buffers for times when buildings must shut down due to positive cases of COVID-19, as well as more frequent opportunities for deep cleaning.

Cons: There's a strong constituency for summer vacation, and pushback to a year-round calendar—even temporarily—could be strong in some communities. Getting siblings on the same schedules can be a logistical challenge. Districts in states that have mandatory start and end dates typically need a waiver for this schedule, although some states have already offered flexibility for the 2020-21 school year.

Assistant Editor Denisa R. Superville contributed to this report.

Education Week spoke to many experts for this installment. In alphabetical order, they are: Elizabeth Allen, the president of the National Science Teachers Association; John Bailey, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute; Nathaniel Beers, a pediatrician at Children's National Hospital in Washington; Andrew Buher, the founder and managing director of Opportunity Labs; Grace Cheng Dodge, the deputy head of school for the Taipei American School; Sharon Danks, the CEO and founder of Green Schoolyards America; Dan Domenech, the executive director of AASA, the School Superintendents Association; Mary Filardo, the executive director of 21st Century School Fund; Ge Harrison, the deputy secretary of educational services at the New South Wales Department of Education; David Hornak, the executive director of the National As for Year-Round Education; Larry Kraut, the chief operating officer of the Taipei An School; Sandy Mackenzie, the director of the Copenhagen International School; C Macysyn, the executive director of the National School Transportation Association; Miller, the superintendent of Bixby Public Schools in Tulsa, Okla.; Ali Mokdad, a pi at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington; Muri, the superintendent of Ector County Independent school district in Odessa, T Mario Ramirez, an emergency medicine physician and the managing director of Opportunity Labs; L. Oliver Robinson, the superintendent of Shenendehowa Centr Schools in Clifton Park, N.Y.; Monica Rogers, the information systems manager fo Tulsa Health Department.

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