

States Begin Releasing Plans for Reopening Schools, but Uncertainty Lingers

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As the 2020-21 school year draws nearer, schools and businesses have been eagerly awaiting school reopening plans. Schools and parents are concerned for children's education and socioemotional wellbeing, which has suffered over the past several months, and eagerly seek to get them back to school. For employers, a productive workforce depends on a return to the classroom, which provides most working parents with the majority of necessary childcare. However, as states have begun to roll out their plans, the only certainty so far is uncertainty.

The biggest question remains whether in-person school will resume this fall, especially as the country grapples with a surge of new COVID-19 cases. So far, the plans are mixed. On the one hand, states like [Connecticut](#) and [Massachusetts](#), at this juncture, are mandating that school districts plan on starting the school year with full in-person learning with heightened health and safety protocols, with fallback plans for hybrid in-person/distance learning and distance learning should they become necessary. On the other hand, states like [New Mexico](#) have already announced that the year will start with a hybrid learning model, with in-person attendance limited to 50 percent of classroom capacity and the use of remote learning from home. In the middle, states like [Georgia](#) have left the decision up to local school districts — at least for now. The largest school district in the United States, the New York City Department of Education, has yet to make a decision. In a letter sent to principals and school superintendents in June, New York City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza said, "Since we cannot predict what September will look like, we can — and must — be prepared for a range of possibilities." The CDC's [interim guidance](#) has not been updated since May 19, 2020.

Despite this uncertainty, several states have taken a shot at crafting school reopening plans. In doing so, several trends have emerged:

- **Multi-Phased Models.** Required development of four learning models: (1) full in-person learning, when disease is contained (most likely only after a vaccine is available); (2) in- person learning

MEET THE AUTHORS



Johanna G. Zelman

Partner
Hartford, Connecticut Office
izelman@fordharrison.com
P: 860-740-1361



Emily Chase-Sosnoff

Counsel
Tampa, Florida Office
echase-sosnoff@fordharrison.com
P: 813-261-7853

with heightened health and safety protocols, when there is minimal spread; (3) hybrid in-person and remote learning, when there is moderate spread, and (4) full remote learning, when there is high spread. Schools will adapt and transition between the latter three models throughout the school year depending on local infection rates until full containment occurs or a vaccine is made available. Some states will allow parents to opt out of sending their children to school and continue with distance learning throughout the 2020-2021 school year.

- **School Buses.** Generally, school buses will be offered with modifications based on infection spread. With minimal spread, buses will be at full or almost full capacity with enhanced health and safety protocols in place, while reduced capacity to allow for social distancing will be in place with moderate spread. Some states will require reduced capacity at all phases. In most states, students, bus drivers and bus monitors will be required to wear face coverings. Some may require bus monitors to enforce face coverings if students are not complying.
- **Daily Screening.** In most states, students and employees will undergo some form of daily screening for symptoms of COVID-19 before entering school buses and/or school premises. Whether this screening will include temperature checks varies widely. For example, temperature checks will be required for students in [California](#) and [Illinois](#), required for staff only in New Mexico, discouraged in [Massachusetts](#), and not required in Connecticut.
- **Cohorts.** Schools are encouraged to implement “cohorts,” where the same group of students and teachers stay together throughout the day and do not mix with other individuals, to the extent possible. This may be more feasible at the primary and middle school levels than in high schools.
- **Rearranging Classrooms.** Many states require that desks be spaced six feet apart if possible, or at least as far apart as classroom space will allow. For example, in Massachusetts, the minimum distance is set at three feet. Desks should all face the same direction, rather than facing each other. When tables are used, students should only sit on one side, spaced apart. Social distancing measures will limit the number of overall students to a class, and where it does not, some states have set those limits.
- **Creative Use of Space.** Schools must plan to repurpose cafeterias, auditoriums, gymnasiums and other larger gathering areas as classroom space to enable social distancing of at least six feet between students. [New Jersey](#) and [Florida](#) have encouraged schools to allow outdoor classrooms where possible and seasonally appropriate.
- **Staggered Scheduling.** Several states have asked school districts to explore staggered lunch and recess schedules and start and end times to minimize crowds in cafeterias, playgrounds, and pick-up lines. Many states are also asking schools to serve lunch in the classroom, if possible, to avoid crowded cafeterias and allow cafeterias to be used for instruction.
- **Face Coverings.** Perhaps the most hotly debated issue in society are face covering mandates, and the issue is no less controversial in the schools. Aside from the social and political meaning that the mask has taken on, many worry about teachers being able to provide effective instruction to younger and disabled students with their mouths covered. While the trend is to require face coverings, and the CDC’s May 19, 2020 interim guidance encourages it, there is no consensus. Some states, like Connecticut, require them; some, like Florida, do not; and some, like Massachusetts, only require them for older students. In Massachusetts, students are expected to provide their own face coverings (with disposable face masks to be made available by the school if necessary), while Illinois schools will provide free face coverings to every teacher, staff member, and student in the state. Some state plans do include “mask breaks,” such as at recess, when students will be able to remove their masks. All plans make exceptions for those who medically cannot wear a mask.

- **Infection Control.** Some states require schools to work with local health departments to report infections and participate in contact tracing. Some require schools to isolate students who show signs of infection during the day until they can be picked up by a family member. There is no consensus on whether to require COVID-19 testing. Not surprisingly, increased handwashing has been featured in nearly every state plan released so far, and many require that hallways be redirected to one-way only to minimize the number of students passing each other. Enhanced building cleaning both during and at the conclusion of each school day also is mandatory under all plans.

Although uncertainty abounds, one thing is clear: the goal in every state is to open schools this fall to the extent that it can be done safely. As New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy stated while unveiling his state's plan, "Today's guidance comes with one overarching requirement: that our public schools will open in some capacity with the health of students, their families, and educators being the top priority."

Bottom Line: There is no prediction for how the 2020-2021 school year will unfold. Students, families, school districts and employers must remain flexible and prepared for all scenarios. Schools preparing faculty and staff for opening day should provide training and supportive measures that will permit an easy transition. Schools should also work with unions cooperatively to ensure that everyone's return to school – including students, administrators, faculty and staff – is smooth, and, most importantly, healthy. Employers must understand that even if their employees' children initially return to the classroom this fall, that could be temporary. Employers should have contingency plans to allow for long-term work-from-home scenarios for those employees forced to remain home with small children who cannot attend school.

If you have any questions regarding this Alert, please contact the authors, [Johanna Zelman](mailto:jzelman@fordharrison.com), partner in our Hartford and New York City offices, at jzelman@fordharrison.com, and [Emily Chase-Sosnoff](mailto:echase-sosnoff@fordharrison.com), counsel in our Tampa office at echase-sosnoff@fordharrison.com. Of course, you may also contact the FordHarrison attorney with whom you usually work.