

AUGUST 2020



A Guide for
**SCHOOL
LEADERS**

Reopening
SCHOOLS
in the **New Normal**





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Into the Unknown: Opening Schools Amid the Pandemic

Kathleen Vail

Schools are more than just places where students go to gain academic knowledge. Schools are the centers of their communities. They are places of stability and support, offering communities identity and pride. They are places of connection.

When the coronavirus pandemic caused the nation to abruptly shut down in mid-March, school districts marshaled resources to make sure learning would not be disrupted. Schools distributed devices and internet hot spots for students. Some districts deployed school buses with hot spots to neighborhoods most in need. Hard copies of curriculum were made available. Teachers were quickly trained on how to deliver instruction remotely.

Just as quickly, districts started to distribute food and supplies for students and their families. Others developed ways to check on their students and families at home and to continue to offer mental health and other services remotely.

Districts and school leaders also helped families, students, and communities deal with the disappointments of not being able to celebrate much-anticipated events and rites of passage. High school sports seasons were canceled.

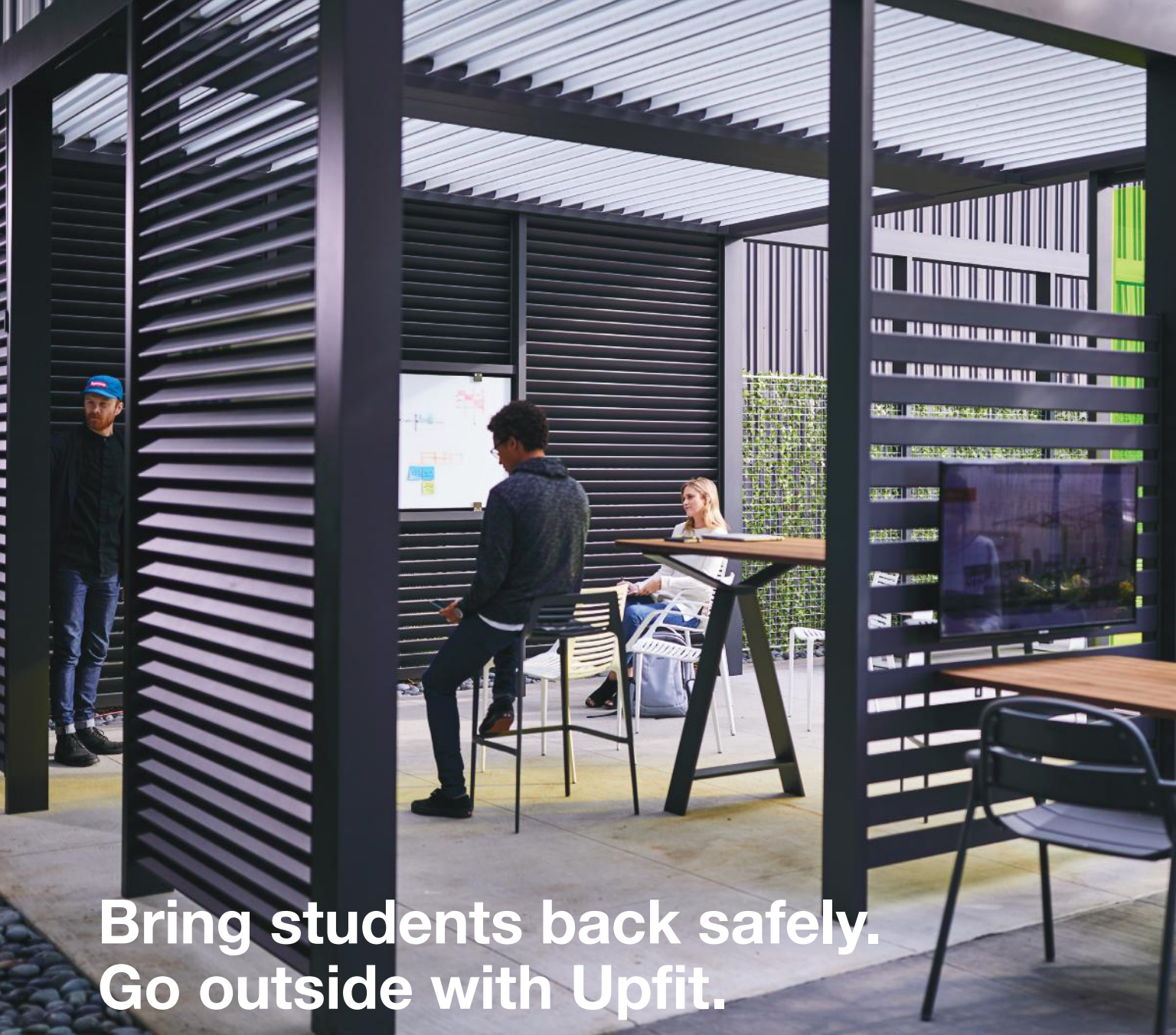
Students couldn't perform in their final plays, recitals, and concerts. Commencement, proms, all-night graduation parties, recognition banquets—all postponed or canceled.

As schools were meeting these challenges, school leaders were looking ahead. Would they be able to open schools in the fall? What would have to occur to protect the safety of teachers, staff, students, and families, while allowing in-person instruction to restart?

The questions are many, and schools will not be able to reopen without support and partnerships from the community and from others.

The building will look different. Cleaning and disinfecting take on urgent importance. Classroom reconfiguring, scheduling, and transportation logistics will be formulated and reexamined. Health and safety issues, employee relations, and equity challenges will all need to be addressed. Academic and mental health support for students in and out of school need to be considered, as well.

Public schools have a mandate to educate students, and school leaders will persevere through these challenges faced by reopening their schools. Resources are available for them through their state school boards associations, NSBA, and community and business partnerships.



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3 Questions to Ask Before Reopening

—
Jaclyn Goddette

One of the most difficult aspects of this pandemic is the lack of definitive answers. Over the last few months, the light switch metaphor—the idea that normal operations can simply be turned on or off—has served as a useful way to understand how to reopen America. The decision to return to school is no different. There are no magic words, no “open sesame,” that will swing open school doors. Instead, school leaders must weight numerous factors to decide how and when to gradually reopen.

The following considerations are designed to help school leaders think broadly about what must happen before reopening. Rather than provide specific guidance, they advise that the basic requirement of student and staff safety are met while deferring to local decision-makers as the ultimate experts of their communities.

① Is there a clear chain of communication?

The National Governors Association, referring to the White House Coronavirus Task Force’s guidelines, acknowledges the authority of gover-

nors to set statewide frameworks for reopening. As governors set criteria, it is important that state education agencies and local education leaders are consulted.

Even after statewide goals are met, school leaders must operate under the assumption that localized outbreaks may occur in their communities. Before reopening schools in the fall, districts should have their framework and a clear idea of what triggers each phase. To this end, schools need to communicate with local health departments and know how to access community data.

② Can your operations plan accommodate different scenarios?

Even when there is minimal community transmission, schools must adhere to basic protective measures and cleaning guidelines. An audit of resources—from cleaning supplies to human capital—helps anticipate where you may need extra support. Leverage partnerships to obtain equipment and work with statewide organizations to close gaps.

Incorporating the latest safety practices into day-to-day operations presents a logistical nightmare. Challenges include changing classes,

routines after lunch, recess, and transportation. As you develop modified operations plans, consider how community transmission levels may necessitate different tiers of mitigation activities. Are your plans flexible enough to support multiple scenarios? How quickly can you move from in-person instruction to blended learning to rolling closures?

It could take more than a year to develop a vaccine. Do your plans encompass both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years?

③ Will your modifications deliver a superior education?

Providing a safe environment for students and staff cannot result in measures that leave academics worse off through remote learning. How will you assess the outcomes of distance learning and weigh those results against standards for the new school year?

Some students benefit more than others from in-person instruction. Vulnerable populations such as English learners and students with disabilities should be prioritized. If your district is considering alternating school days or blended learning, build in the flexibility to maximize classroom time for these groups.

CDC Recommendations for Reopening

Jaclyn Goddette

The CDC Foundation and Leavitt Partners in June hosted an online seminar, “Tools to Evolve Your COVID-19 Schools Strategy.” The seminar focused on supporting school leaders as they make difficult decisions on how to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 when schools reopen. While the webinar provided a comprehensive overview of CDC guidance, former secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt noted that no government guidance can be complete enough to cover every situation.

To help school leaders answer practical questions when specific guidance is unavailable, Leavitt Partners developed a framework of seven situational characteristics to break down environments or settings into elements that can be categorized as higher or lower risk.

NSBA Executive Director and CEO Anna Maria Chávez participated in the seminar on a panel with other education association leaders. Chávez walked attendees through an example of how a school leader might use the framework to mitigate risk factors in hallways during transition periods. Chávez identified movement, proximity, group size, and congestion as situational characteristics that take precedence during transitions.

She offered strategies such as instituting directional guidance in hallways to control traffic flow, reconsidering schedules and room assignments to minimize travel distances, and strategically placing staff to monitor

Descriptor	Lower Risk	Higher Risk
Movement	Directed	Undirected
Duration	<15 Minutes	>15 Minutes
Proximity	> 6 Feet	< 6 Feet
Group Size	<Recommended Limit	>Recommended Limit
Respiratory Output	Normal	Increased
Touch	Low	High
Congestion	Low	High

SOURCE: Leavitt Partners

movement. “All of these factors are critical,” Chávez explained, “but I think it comes down to some key points around how can we be innovative depending on where we are at the local level and what creativity will we bring to those solutions.”

“There’s going to be a lot of pressure on these local officials and local school administrators about doing the right thing,” Chávez said during the question-and-answer portion of the webinar. “Our recommendation is: Start those conversations now.”

The online seminar is available at www.cdcfoundation.org/covid-19-seminars.



NSBA, in collaboration with national education associations and industry experts, will provide essential national-level considerations as you work with your state education agencies to develop your roadmaps for school reopening and recovery.

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