

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Preparing Facilities for Students' Return in the Wake of COVID-19

By Megan Blanco and Erika Eitland

State and local officials who shuttered school buildings to stem the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 are beginning to plan for the return of students and staff. They will need evidence-based strategies to know how best to create and maintain safe, healthy spaces.

To inform their plans, federal health officials have provided guidance on cleaning and disinfection of facilities, appropriate chemicals to use for disinfection, and protocols for countering ongoing virus threats. The current pause in the use of facilities also represents an opportunity to make them healthier overall.

CLEANING AND DISINFECTING SCHOOLS

To help schools clean and disinfect and to assist in counseling and distance learning and associated costs, Congress appropriated \$100 million in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to Project SERV (School Emergency Response to Violence), a program administered by the U.S. Department of Education.¹ These funds are authorized for dissemination through September 30, 2021.

Because closures have kept students and staff from entering most campuses, disinfection at this time is unwarranted. "While it is possible that the virus may be detected for a period of hours or even a few days on hard surfaces, there is no data to suggest it would be viable after longer periods of time," said Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer at the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

If states are using Project SERV funds for anticipated cleaning needs, they may consider surveying districts to assess whether they have sufficient cleaning and disinfecting supplies, as well as personal protective equipment (PPE), which the U.S. Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises that custodial staff and others wear when cleaning for the coronavirus.²

Once buildings reopen, districts should ensure that regular cleaning and disinfecting activities align with CDC guidance. Because the virus can live on surfaces for approximately seven days, CDC advises cleaning (removing germs) followed by disinfecting (killing germs) in highly trafficked areas and on equipment like desks, keyboards, door-knobs, bathrooms, and screens, in addition to regular daily cleaning activities.³

They also recommend leaving outside doors and windows open to allow for air circulation, though this should not interfere with building security requirements.

CHEMICAL USE IN SCHOOLS

States vary in the specificity of their policies on environmentally safe chemicals for school cleaning. According to NASBE's State Policy Database on School Health, 17 states encourage districts to use environmentally safe chemicals and reduce chemical exposure in schools, and 24 states plus the District of Columbia required it as of the 2017–18 school year.⁴

The **Mississippi** Asthma and Anaphylaxis Child Safety Act requires public school districts to support local school health councils in adopting and implementing a local school wellness policy that minimizes the use of chemical cleaning products and pesticides.⁵ **California's** guide aids local districts in adhering to the state's policy.⁶

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lists federally approved disinfectants for killing coronavirus germs.⁷ It cautions that use of unsafe chemicals can exacerbate asthma, which weakens sufferers' immune systems. State policy can encourage or re-

quire schools to use green cleaning supplies, which are less harmful for human health and the environment.⁸

MAINTAINING HEALTHY SCHOOLS

Health officials estimate that a coronavirus vaccine will likely not be made widely available until some time in 2021.⁹ Informed by local transmission rates and guidance from health officials, most states are developing school reopening plans.

When creating these plans, states should develop guidance targeted to school and child care settings to mitigate the spread of the virus and consider scenarios in which someone infected with the virus enters these settings. State boards can ask the following questions:

- Does the plan address precautions like distancing desks, temperature taking, and providing PPE to students and staff? Does requiring students and staff to wear masks pose other safety concerns?
- How will schools protect students and staff with chronic conditions like asthma and diabetes?
- What protocols should be in place if a person suspected of having the virus enters the school facility?
- How will the state support districts in securing PPE and environmentally safe chemicals, and how will these resources be distributed equitably?

Teachers unions have signaled that they want educators included in discussions on reopening plans generally, including safety measures such as PPE.¹⁰ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) classifies educators as essential critical infrastructure workers, even as it projects continued shortages of PPE.¹¹ Changes to state law or regulations may be needed to assist schools in obtaining PPE during the shortage.¹²

Some states gave schools guidance on cleaning and disinfecting facilities during initial closures. For instance, **New York** identified

frequently touched areas that warrant disinfecting and reiterated the requirement that all products adhere to the state's green cleaning program parameters.¹³ **Georgia** offers more details, such as advising against students sharing pencils, steaming instead of vacuuming carpets when a case of coronavirus is suspected, and special cleaning considerations for school nutrition programs.¹⁴

In March, the **California** legislature appropriated \$100 million to enable districts to buy PPE and pay for supplies and labor related to cleaning school sites.¹⁵ Schools in other states have reportedly sought community assistance in obtaining cleaning materials due to lack of funding and supplies.¹⁶

School staff considering crowdsourcing supplies should communicate clearly which products are safe for use around children. **Minnesota's** Department of Health, for example, lists recommended cleaning supplies for schools on its coronavirus web page.¹⁷ Providing hand sanitizer dispensers and no-touch water fountains may also help stop the virus's spread. Other low- to no-cost strategies include students' frequent handwashing, removing materials like rugs that are harder to clean, and health education on the virus and hygiene.

OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

With national attention focused on prevention and health, state officials can usefully consider the daily harms and hindrances that unhealthy school environments posed for children before the pandemic. A 1995 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that \$5 billion was needed to remove hazardous substances from schools, such as lead in paint and water, asbestos, and radon, all of which are persistent, prevalent pollutants associated with irreversible health challenges.¹⁸

GAO also estimated that 11.6 million students had unsatisfactory school ventilation. Poor indoor air quality is associated with increased infectious disease transmission and asthma exacerbation as well as decreased attention, comprehension, and test performance.¹⁹ Yet between 2000 and 2017 the capital outlay or building-related expenditures across the United States decreased by 10 percent.²⁰

Schools can take advantage of decreased traffic and available workforce capacity to remove lead-based paint, asbestos, mold, and other harmful pollutants—especially important in underserved, minority communities. Students in these communities not only experience the greatest hardship during COVID-related closures but were attending schools with the greatest backlog of maintenance concerns and poor indoor environmental quality.²¹ By removing competing environmental challenges now, state and local officials can make schools healthier and COVID-related cleaning and disinfection easier and thereby reduce the risks of reopening.

CONCLUSION

Districts and schools will want to prepare their facilities to be safe, healthy places to which students can return. State officials can support districts as they develop plans for closure, cleaning, and reopening of school facilities, both now and in future crises. States should ensure that districts with less capacity to manage operations, less knowledge of strategies to limit infectious disease, or without detailed closure and reopening plans are not disadvantaged at a time when all schools need guidance to ensure the safety of all individuals that come in contact with the school building.

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NOTES

1 CARES Act, S. 3548, 116th Congress (2019–20).

2 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting: Public Spaces, Workplaces, Business, Schools, and Homes," web page (Washington, DC, N.d.), https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening_America_Guidance.pdf.

3 But CDC's guidance also says disinfectants should typically not be applied to items that children use.

4 State Policy Database, "Chemical Hazards," web page (Alexandria, VA: NASBE), <https://statepolicies.nasbe.org/health/categories/physical-environment/chemical-hazards>.

5 Mississippi Asthma and Anaphylaxis Child Safety Act, Mississippi Code § 37-11-71 (2014).

6 Debbi Shrem, Justine Weinberg, and Jennifer Flattery, "Healthy Cleaning and Asthma-Safer Schools: A How-To Guide" (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Public Health, October 2014).

7 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "List N: Disinfectants for Use against SARS-CoV-2" (Washington, DC, April 16, 2020), <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>.

8 EPA, "Model Program for the State School Environmental Health Guidelines" (Washington, DC, N.d.), <https://www.epa.gov/schools/appendix-model-program-state-school-environmental-health-guidelines>.

9 National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, "Developing Therapeutics and Vaccines for Coronaviruses," web page (Bethesda, MD, April 2020), <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/coronaviruses-therapeutics-vaccines>.

10 Nicole Gaudiano, "Teachers Union: 'Scream Bloody Murder' if Schools Reopen against Medical Advice," *Politico* (April 28, 2020).

11 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Addressing PPE Needs in Non-Healthcare Setting," web page (Washington, DC, N.d.), <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2020/04/22/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-addressing-ppe-needs-non-healthcare-setting>.

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14 Georgia Department of Education, "Pandemic Planning: Information for Georgia Public School Districts" (Atlanta, 2020).

15 California Senate Bill No. 117, Chapter 3 (2020).

16 Nader Issa and Lauren FitzPatrick, "Some CPS Schools Still Waiting for Cleaning Supplies after District Promised Additional Resources," *Chicago Sun-Times* (March 12, 2020).

17 Minnesota Department of Health, "Recommended Supplies for Schools: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," web page (St. Paul, MN, N.d.), <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/supplies.html>.

18 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "School Facilities: Condition of America's Schools" (Washington, DC, 1995), <https://www.gao.gov/products/HEHS-95-61>.

19 Erika Eitland et al., "Foundations for Student Success: How School Buildings Influence Student Health, Thinking, and Performance" (Boston: Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Healthy Buildings Program, 2017).

20 National Center for Education Statistics, "The Condition of Education: Public School Expenditures," web page (Washington, DC: Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, April 2020), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cmb.asp.

21 GAO, "School Facilities: America's Schools Reporting Differing Conditions" (Washington, DC, 1996).

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