States Make Plans for Reopening

By Joseph Hedger

In anticipation of the 2020–21 school year, states have been creating and updating guidance for district and school reopening plans. Informed by public health guidelines and existing data on the state spread of COVID-19, state guidelines established a process for engaging stakeholders, a menu of approaches to learning, and a focus on equity. They also set precedents for how districts will respond in future emergencies.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

During summer 2020, 27 states and the District of Columbia gathered groups of education and health stakeholders to collaborate on safely reopening schools in the fall (see figure 1). Governors in Connecticut, Idaho, Michigan, and Oregon—and the mayor of Washington, DC—orchestrated education task forces. In nine states, the state superintendent convened stakeholder groups, and in Delaware and North Dakota, the governor and state superintendent created the groups jointly. State boards of education established task forces and committees in Illinois and New York, and the department of education convened the rest.

According to the Johns Hopkins University eSchool+ Initiative, 41 states factor engagement and transparency into their reopening guidelines, a category that includes stakeholder engagement processes for developing pandemic-response policies and guidance; education of students, parents, or staff about COVID-19; and ongoing engagement strategies during the coming school year.[1]

In **Mississippi**, a workgroup of nine district superintendents partnered with the state's department of education to outline key issues that districts should address when reopening schools.[2]

Other states have suggested that districts designate a local group or leader to make decisions on fall reopening and possible future school closures.[3] One such state is **Florida**, whose guidance for reopening healthy learning environments states that "reopening ultimately must be driven by local data and the goal of restoring optimal conditions for learning." It also recommends that districts create a crisis response team to coordinate with local health departments and medical experts and make local decisions.[4] However, on July 6, Florida Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran issued an executive order that requires all school boards and charter school governing boards to open brick and mortar schools at least five days per week.[5]

The **West Virginia** Department of Education posted three statewide surveys on their webpage to gather input: a school survey on the pandemic and the impact of extended school closures on students; a community survey that includes reopening scenarios, communications, and community engagement; and an adult education needs survey.[6]
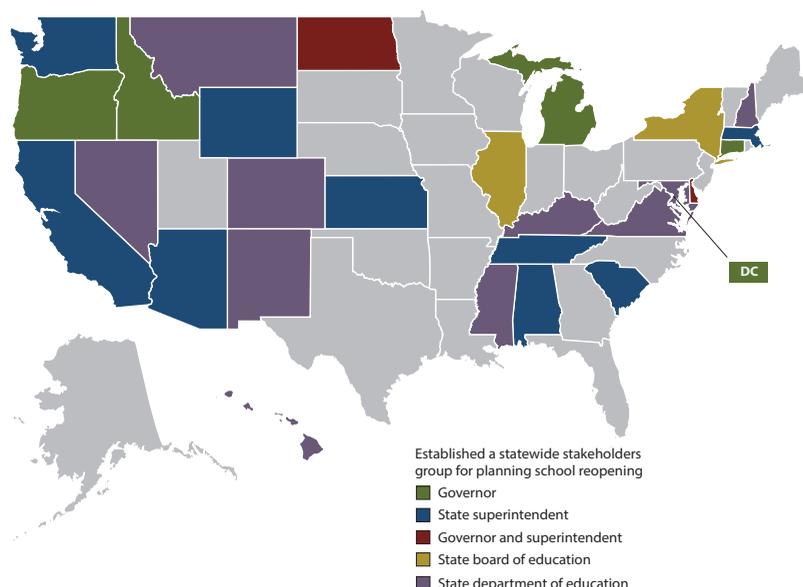
TIERED APPROACH AND CONTINUITY PLANS

Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia include a tiered approach in their reopening guidance, allowing districts to select models based on the prevalence of COVID-19 in their schools or communities, as determined by local health officials or, in some cases, statewide stages of reopening.[7] Most states suggest choosing from a menu of options, the most common being

- continued distance learning for everyone;

- a hybrid model (part distance and part in-person learning); or

- returning all students to the physical school building.

Arizona's Roadmap for Reopening Schools includes considerations for four scenarios: continued distance learning, partial or delayed in-person learning, or all students present in physical buildings. Part of the reopening process in Arizona are local continuity of operations plans, which are col-

Figure 1. States Convene Stakeholders on Reopening

Established a statewide stakeholders group for planning school reopening

- Governor
- State superintendent
- Governor and superintendent
- State board of education
- State department of education

DC

[Correction: This piece originally attributed the establishment of Hawaii's stakeholder group to the state board of education.]

laboratively developed documents on what leaders need to consider as they prepare for future school closures.[8]

Georgia's guidance uses a district decision tree graphic to illustrate its menu of instructional models and responses that can be adopted based on the level of community spread of the coronavirus. For example, if a district shows minimal to moderate spread, then they can determine whether a traditional, hybrid, or full distance/remote learning model would work best in their circumstance.[9]

On June 8, the **North Carolina** Department of Health and Human Services instructed schools to design three reopening plans that incorporate levels of social distancing and limited capacity, with the most cautious, "Plan C," calling for students to remain home for remote learning.[10] This guidance is also distilled in a decision tree, which calls on districts to reevaluate as new data and trends emerge. The state board subsequently voted to adopt these operational guidelines.[11]

South Carolina's AccelerateED Task Force divided its guidance and recommendations into four phases. Phase one describes actions in early summer to establish frameworks and processes for resumption of school in the fall, phase two elaborates on summer planning and preparation, phase three details preopening steps to ensure increased student learning rather than simply making up lost days, and phase four recommends procedures and protocols for reopening and continuity of operations.[12]

Virginia details three phases of reopening that follow the governor's Forward Virginia state reopening phases. Each phase includes checklists on programmatic and health and safety recommendations and covers how schools should approach in-person instruction, child care, school meals, and athletics in each phase. The guidance also describes health risks associated with virtual-only, hybrid, and in-person class models.[13]

EQUITY CONCERNS
Statewide reopening guidance advises districts on how to reach students who struggle to access remote learning.

In **Connecticut's** reopening plan, Commissioner of Education Miguel Cardona urged attention to students' equitable access to devices and technology, high-quality curriculum, and social-emotional and mental health supports, and he pledged that the department would provide resources to aid these efforts.[14]

Maine's Framework for Return to Classroom Instruction states, "The pillars of this framework include safety, equity, and accessibility for all students and staff, and should encourage innovation and honor the professional integrity of Maine educators." The framework also covers support for students with disabilities, students who are English learners, and other populations, as well as adult education programs and career and technical education.[15]

The **Oregon** Department of Education offers four guiding principles, one of which centers decision making on equity. Its guidance recognizes the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Latinx, and Pacific Islander communities; students with disabilities; and students and families navigating poverty. It includes juvenile detention education programs, youth correction education programs, the Oregon School for the Deaf, and long-term care and treatment programs in its definition of public schools. It calls on districts to "[a]pply an equity-informed, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lens to promote culturally sustaining and revitalizing educational systems that support every child."[16]

In a charged political environment and as new research becomes available, policymakers will need to be prepared to effectively communicate new decisions made at national, state, and district levels.

Joseph Hedger is NASBE's associate editor.

NOTES
1 Johns Hopkins University eSchool+ Initiative, "Analysis of School Reopening Plans," webpage (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, July 2020), https://equityschoolplus.jhu.edu/reopening-policy-tracker/.

2 Mississippi Achieves, "Considerations for Reopening Mississippi Schools," press release (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Education, June 2020), https://msachieves.mdek12.org/considerations-for-reopening-mississippi-schools/.

3 Including Florida, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont.

4 Florida Department of Education, "Reopening Florida's Schools and the CARES Act" (Tallahassee, FL: author, N.d.), http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19861/urlt/FLDOEReopeningCARESAct.pdf.

5 Richard Corcoran, Department of Education Order No. 2020-EO-06 (Tallahassee, FL: Department of Education, 2020), http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19861/urlt/DOE-2020-EO-06.pdf.

6 West Virginia Department of Education, "Re-entry Surveys," webpage (Charleston, WV: author, N.d.), https://wvde.us/school-system-re-entry/re-entry-surveys/.

7 States include Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

8 Arizona Department of Education, "Roadmap for Reopening Schools" (Phoenix: author, June 2020), https://www.azed.gov/communications/files/2020/03/FINAL-DRAFT-AZ-Roadmap-for-Reopening-Schools_6_1_20-1.pdf.

9 Georgia Department of Education and Department of Public Health, "Georgia's Path to Recovery for K-12 Schools" (Atlanta: author, N.d.), https://www.georgiainsights.com/uploads/1/2/2/2/122221993/georgias_k-12_recovery_plan.pdf.

10 North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, "StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12) Interim Guidance" (Raleigh, NC: author, June 2020), https://files.nc.gov/covid/documents/guidance/Strong-Schools-NC-Public-Health-Toolkit.pdf.

11 Greg Childress, "State Board of Ed Adopts Safety Guidelines for Reopening Public Schools" (Raleigh, NC: NC Policy Watch, June 2020).

12 South Carolina Department of Education, "Draft: AccelerateEd Task Force: Guidance and Recommendations for 2020–21 School Year" (Columbia, SC: author, June 2020), https://ed.sc.gov/newsroom/covid-19-coronavirus-and-south-carolina-schools/accelerateed-task-force/draft-accelerateed-task-force-guidance-and-recommendations-for-2020-21-school-year/.

13 Virginia Department of Education, "Phase Guidance for Virginia Schools" (Richmond, VA: author, July 2020), https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/pdf/Final-Phase-Guidance-for-Virginia-Schools-6.9.20.pdf.

14 Connecticut State Department of Education, "Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together" (Hartford, CT: author, June 2020), https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/COVID-19/CTReopeningSchools.pdf.

15 Maine Department of Education, "Framework for Return to Classroom Instruction," webpage (Augusta, ME: author, June 2020), https://www.maine.gov/doe/covid-19/reintegrate.

16 Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority, "Ready School, Safe Learners: Guidance for School Year 2020–21" (Salem, OR: ODOE, June 2020), https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/healthsafety/Documents/Ready%20Schools%20Safe%20Learners%202020-21%20Guidance.pdf.

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