

July 7, 2020

New Routines and Options Needed Next School Year

By Ben DeGrow

Summary

School districts and families will need more flexibility to cope with schooling in a reopened society.

Main text word count: 726



Most parents prefer a blend of on-site and in-home instruction.

In a typical June, most Michigan students would have cleaned out their desks or lockers, celebrated graduations at in-person ceremonies, and not given a second thought to what the coming school year would look like.

But the uncertainties of this pandemic have unsettled familiar routines and raised new questions. On June 30, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer released a roadmap detailing required and recommended health protocols for all K-12 schools for the upcoming academic year. The guidelines vary based on which phase the state is at in her MI Safe Start plan.

Michigan was a latecomer in laying out the terms for schools to reopen with in-person instruction. A national survey conducted in May for the Foundation for Excellence in Education revealed that many states had already announced plans. By early June, states from North Carolina to Oregon had released official guidance.

Even so, school leaders are left to navigate a diverse assortment of parent expectations, student needs and public health requirements for the 2020-21 year.

According to the governor's order, under more severe COVID-19 conditions (deemed Phase 3 or lower) all school buildings in a region should close, with only remote learning taking place. If conditions don't improve by the end of summer, most Michigan schools would reopen with staff and older students required to wear face coverings at all times on campus. Younger students would have to wear them in common areas. Schools also would be required "to support healthy hygiene behaviors," cooperate with local health officials to screen pupils and teachers, and prohibit assemblies.

Some families may be willing to accept stringent measures, as they need a place for their children as they work outside the home. A poll conducted for the Tri-County Alliance for Public Education revealed that nearly half of Michigan parents want school buildings to safely reopen for this reason. The state's chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics also recently advised a moderate approach to reopening, urging state and local education leaders to "prioritize in-person education for Michigan's children this fall."

According to a University of Michigan survey conducted in June, parents are divided on the question of mandatory face coverings. Support for it

is weakest when it comes to requiring younger children to mask themselves. However, most respondents tend to be comfortable with daily temperature screenings and spreading out trips to and from school so buses are less crowded.

More than 60% favor a mixture of on-site and at-home instruction, an idea floated by the Ann Arbor and West Bloomfield school districts. Similar blended learning options are already provided to some Michigan students. In Clintondale High School's flipped classrooms, teachers use in-person meetings to mentor students and help with projects rather than lecture and present new material. FlexTech High School's three charter campuses give older students more freedom and responsibility to complete academic work and meet with teachers outside the regimented bell schedule.

Many more districts undoubtedly will find flexible scheduling and methods attractive. That may require changes to local labor contracts, as well as more freedom from rigid state rules that narrowly define student attendance. It also may require special permission from the state to start classes before Labor Day.

A slate of legislation complementing the governor's plan offers schools the flexibility they will need. It will also encourage them to use remote instruction when inclement weather or social distancing measures occur. To help keep students on track, the bills also require Michigan schools to test students and report their math and reading results as they return this fall.

It appears that about 10% of students, based on multiple surveys, will not return for any form of in-person learning, so families will need more options. Michigan students currently can enroll full time in 14 different tuition-free cyber schools. But one proposal in Lansing would allow middle and high school students in other districts to take more online courses and take them from different providers.

For many local districts, losing a tenth of their students would represent a dramatic shift in budgeting funds and delivering education. Some, like Fraser Public Schools in Macomb County, will now offer a full-time virtual program to help preserve their enrollment. Leaders in other schools will make other choices, depending on what their communities need to advance student learning. Whatever state policymakers do, they should give local decision-makers and parents even more room to maneuver.

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