



New Jersey School Boards Association

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Searching for a ‘New Normal’ in New Jersey’s Public Schools



**An NJSBA Special Report on
How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State**

May 20, 2020

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www.njsba.org/new-normal2020

The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of the state's local boards of education and includes the majority of New Jersey's charter schools as associate members. NJSBA provides training, advocacy and support to advance public education and promote the achievement of all students through effective governance.

Searching for a New Normal in New Jersey's Public Schools
New Jersey School Boards Association

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May 20, 2020

Dear Member of the New Jersey Education Community,

The New Jersey School Boards Association is pleased to present this special report, "Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools: How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State."

In the two months since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of our public schools, everyone involved in education has made a valiant effort to transition our students to digital learning. But now, as we look toward the reopening of schools, New Jersey's education community faces even greater challenges.

School leaders and educators must assess student progress after an extended suspension of classroom instruction.

Adjustments to curriculum and expanded remedial programming may be necessary.

The logistical quandary of adhering to social distancing in classrooms, cafeterias, gymnasiums and school buses must be solved.

Equally critical will be assuring students, parents and staff that schools are safe.

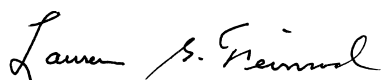
This special report contains information on the safe reopening of schools, students' mental health, academic and extracurricular programs, budgetary issues, and preparations for the future. It is designed to help school districts further define challenges in these areas and develop strategies to meet them.

The report draws on the viewpoints of New Jersey's local school officials, research by experts in education, medicine and public health, and other nations' experiences in reopening schools.

This month, New Jersey will begin charting a course for delivering instruction when our schools finally reopen. Led by the state Department of Education, this process will address four areas: Continuity of Learning; Conditions for Learning; Leadership and Planning, and Policy and Funding.

The New Jersey School Boards Association looks forward to participating in this critical undertaking with other education stakeholders. Certainly, this special report will inform the process by providing the perspective of local boards of education and school district leaders.

Sincerely,



Lawrence S. Feinsod, Ed.D.
Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The selectively lethal coronavirus spread through New Jersey at a pace that would make a wildfire seem like a wisp of smoke.

On Wednesday, March 4, New Jersey had its first diagnosed case.¹ On Tuesday, March 10, New Jersey reported its first coronavirus death.²

By the time Gov. Phil Murphy signed his historic [Executive Order 104](#), which closed all New Jersey schools on March 18, there were 178 New Jersey cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus. On May 18, only two months later, New Jersey officials are reporting 148,039 coronavirus cases and 10,435 deaths³ – the second-highest numbers in the nation.

During the 71 days that have passed since the first death from the virus in New Jersey, elementary and secondary education in New Jersey underwent an urgent metamorphosis. The closing of school buildings, and the gallant efforts of teachers, administrators, and local boards of education to launch online instruction, practically overnight, likely saved thousands of lives. Students, teachers and administrators pushed past personal tragedies to do their jobs. In Newark, for example, where 66 teachers, administrators and staff tested positive, and six died, building principals drove through city streets as late as 11 p.m., hand-delivering Chromebook computers to some of the 11,000 students who needed them to join lessons online.⁴

With all of the efforts to respond to the crisis, reports about the quality of the online instruction for students varied. In an NJSBA survey sent last month,⁵ one respondent called online instruction “a work in progress.” Respondents in some rural areas reported problems with internet access.

About 20,000 Paterson students were unable to participate in online instruction, relying instead on paper packages, Paul Brubaker, the district’s communications director, told NJSpotlight.com on May 14.⁶

Others, especially in suburban districts with adequate resources, reported the transition to online instruction had gone smoothly.

On April 28, the New Jersey Leadership for Educational Excellence (LEE) [sent a letter](#) to Gov. Murphy, urging him to keep schools closed for the remainder of the academic year. The LEE group is a coalition of the state’s major education organizations, including NJSBA.

“Reopening schools presents serious challenges that are far more complex than even those involved in closing schools and moving to online instruction,” the letter said. “These include, but are certainly not limited to, readjusting curriculum, designing remediation for students who may have fallen behind during the closure, and accommodating social distancing and other preventive measures in the classroom, in cafeterias and gymnasiums, on school buses, and during extra-curricular activities.”

“Above all else, parents, students and school staff must be assured that health will not be compromised when schools reopen,” the leaders of the LEE organizations

continued. “The current data do not indicate that we can provide such assurance if schools reopen in the spring.”

At a press conference on May 4, the governor announced schools would stay closed for the rest of the current academic year, that is, until at least June 30.⁷

The extended closure gives superintendents and boards of education 111 days until the Tuesday after Labor Day, the traditional start of the new school year, to decide a multitude of issues that must be resolved before schools can reopen. The challenge facing school districts is how to establish a “new normal,” in the midst of a global pandemic caused by a virus that will likely still be present when schools finally do reopen.

To provide information on key issues, the NJSBA announced⁸ on April 16 that it would issue a report concerning the following issues:

- Measuring the academic progress made by students during a period of virtual instruction;
- Providing necessary remedial preparation;
- Adjusting educational programs to accommodate social distancing and other preventive measures;
- Maintaining adequate sanitation of school facilities, and
- Determining the pandemic’s impact on school finances.

Since April 16, the NJSBA has researched more than 100 articles, publications and studies, conducted interviews with school administrators, mental health experts and board of education members, and analyzed more than 1,000 responses to a survey issued to local school district leaders.

Some administrators and board members said, quite understandably, that they had not had time to grieve the loss of key staff. They were fighting exhaustion caused by the constant air of crisis and the non-stop rapid-fire of events since the governor ordered schools closed. Immediate answers to questions that no local school leader has ever faced in New Jersey in at least 100 years proved elusive.

Still, the NJSBA identified common problems and first thoughts about solutions. The schools must try to reopen, the interview subjects agreed. But the health and safety of students, teachers and staff are paramount. How much risk is acceptable? What safety measures are essential, and how can schools afford them? What would relieve financial pressure on schools? What conditions would establish a health emergency that would trigger schools to close again?

STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on interviews and research, this special report presents strategies for the consideration of local school districts and recommendations for action by state and federal governments.

1. **Mental Health** The mental health of students and staff is of the greatest

importance. Before schools reopen, and before any evaluative tests are administered, school districts should make a sustained effort to establish a sense of calm and trust so that learning, and assessment of learning, can occur.

2. **Communication** Administrators should engage in early, sustained communication with board members, parents and staff, outlining and thoroughly explaining the measures being taken so that they can instill confidence that schools will be a safe place. Before school reopens, all stakeholders should understand what the “new normal” will be, and how it will work.
3. **Protective Equipment Guidelines** To sustain the health of students and staff, boards of education should work with their superintendents to adopt clear guidelines establishing the level of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that will be provided by the district and what equipment may be brought from home. For example, will facemasks be required? What types of masks are acceptable? How will local PPE standards compare with guidelines from the state, the Centers for Disease Control and other agencies?
4. **Emergency Action Plan** Before schools reopen, boards of education should work with their superintendents to revise closing plans that address the resumption of full online instruction if school buildings are again closed due to health and safety considerations.
5. **Diagnostic Tool** Once a safe learning environment is re-established, academic assessment, that is appropriate to each district, should be administered to determine each students’ educational progress and to identify the need for remediation.
6. **Remedial Programs** As early as possible in the budgeting process, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) should identify available funding for school districts to address the remedial needs of students.
7. **Flexibility** The NJDOE should ensure that districts have the financial and regulatory flexibility they need to respond to the crisis. The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC), which is the state’s monitoring and district self-evaluation system, should either be suspended or revised so that districts are not penalized for taking actions necessary to address the pandemic.
8. **Provide School Districts with Updated Financial Data** To plan for the eventual reopening of schools, education leaders need accurate information now on the pandemic’s impact on revenue. Toward this goal, the state must provide local boards of education with updated information on funding for the 2020-2021 school year. Waiting until the governor’s new budget message in August is too late.
9. **A Menu of Options for Reopening** In developing a blueprint to guide the reopening of schools, state education officials should work with stakeholder organizations and consider other states’ plans, such

as Maryland's [Recovery Plan for Education](#), released May 6; and the Missouri School Boards Association plan, [Pandemic Recovery Considerations: Re-Entry and Reopening](#), issued May 5. Both plans offer a variety of strategies and encourage districts to choose options that work best for their communities.

10. **Help Teacher Candidates Complete Training** Schools were closed before teacher candidates could complete required classroom observations and training. New Jersey should formulate an appropriate plan to provide an adequate pool of teacher candidates for the upcoming year. Other states, including California and Maryland, have developed plans to help teacher candidates complete their training.

In the pages that follow, this special report will offer analysis of information, strategies and common concerns gleaned from interviews and a review of research and publications. Topics will include the issues that must be resolved before schools can reopen safely such as appropriate protective gear, staffing, social-emotional learning, and budgetary concerns. In addition, the report will explore academic challenges, special education services and extracurricular activities. Consideration will be paid to preparing for the future, in the event that, as the [director of the Center for Disease Prevention and Control predicts](#), the virus makes a strong return in the months ahead.⁹



REOPENING SCHOOLS SAFELY

WANTED: A superintendent who has experience in making schools safe during a global pandemic.

In the face of a virus that has already killed more than 10,000 people in New Jersey, and the continued need for firm guidance on what must be done to reopen schools safely, it's no wonder that superintendents are losing sleep.

"The biggest challenge is how do you learn to live with ambiguity," said Dr. Margaret Dolan, superintendent of the Westfield Public Schools in suburban Union County during an April 30 NJSBA podcast when asked what keeps her up at night. "You have to say we can tentatively plan for this, but you have to tentatively plan three ways because you don't know," she said.

"My hope is absolutely with our scientists," she said. "That's what's going to change this. ... I'm counting on the scientists to make those steps forward, and then there will be a little less ambiguity and we will know what the future really will be."

Barring a vaccine, or a treatment, that can be ready by September, education leaders in New Jersey are struggling to define how schools can open without threatening the health and safety of their students and staff.

West Windsor-Plainsboro Superintendent David Aderhold, who also serves as president of the Garden State Coalition of Schools, says he and his fellow superintendents do not have the answers, but they have "hundreds of questions" about how to move forward.¹⁰ Aderhold is a member of the state Senate Education Recovery Task Force, led by Sen. M. Teresa Ruiz, chair of the Senate Education Committee. NJSBA is also represented on the task force.

"What is ultimately going to drive our response is public health," Aderhold said. "What's in front of us is a pandemic global health crisis. What's the appropriate role for schools in that?"

An NJSBA survey sent to school board members, superintendents, and school business administrators on April 16 drew more than 1,000 responses to the question, "What strategies is your district considering to provide classroom instruction while accommodating social distancing?"

Nearly three out of ten respondents (29.14%) cited alternate in-person and remote instruction.

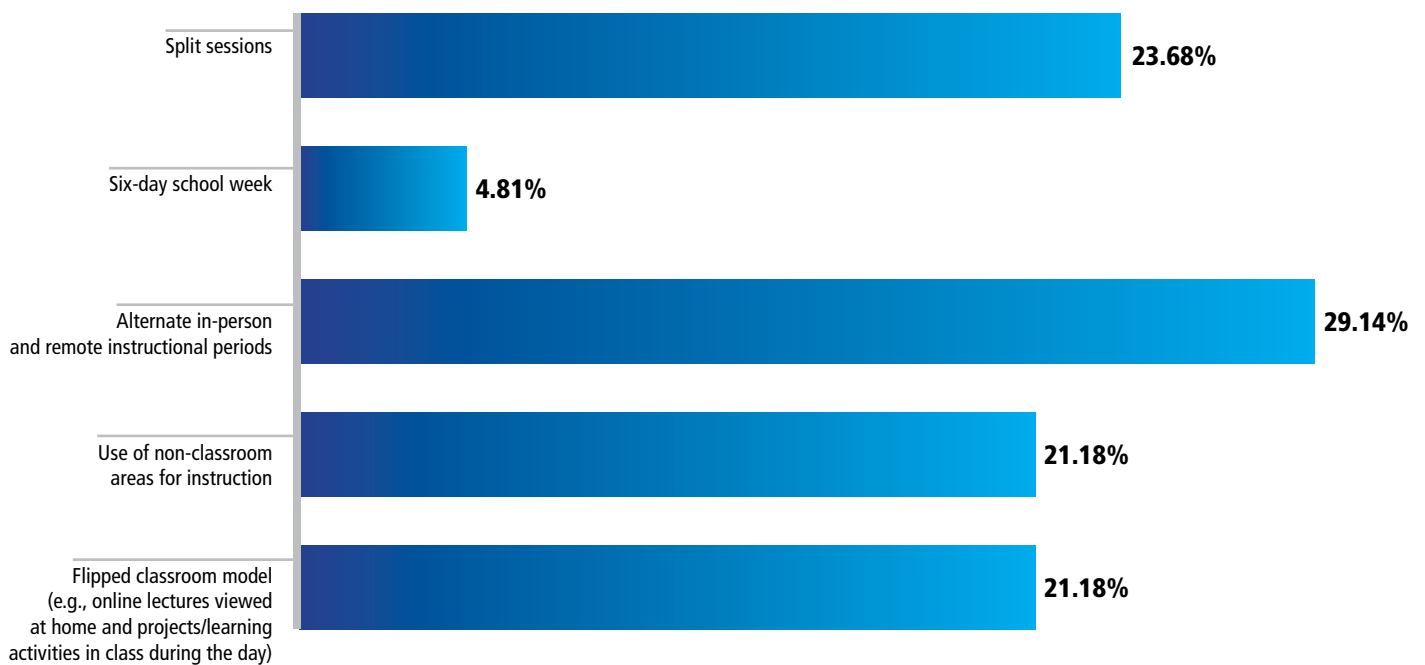
Another 23.68% favored split sessions.

How, Aderhold asked, would that work?

"If you run split sessions, you'd have to double or triple your bus costs," he said.

What strategies is your district considering to provide classroom instruction while accommodating social distancing? (select all that apply)

NJSBA SURVEY RESPONSES



His regional school district serves about 9,500 students in Mercer and Middlesex counties. With the governor saying that the state is facing deficits of \$20 billion to \$30 billion,¹¹ where will the additional money come from?

“We don’t have the financial capability to expand our teaching sessions, so if anyone suggests that we can somehow extend the day or have more sessions, I just say, financially, ‘How?’ And if you want to think in terms of eight-year-olds or 10-year-olds at a bus stop, there’s no such thing as ‘socially distancing’ them for long,” Aderhold said.

“When we start thinking in terms of return, what does a socially distanced bus stop look like?” he asked. “Are we going to sit every three seats on a bus?”

“If masks are required, can districts obtain the hundreds of thousands needed by students every day? If students wear inferior, homemade masks, and the virus spreads, will districts be held liable for any deaths?” asked Aderhold. “When you start playing out the logistics of real-life school scenarios into the idea of returning, it’s difficult to see what it’s going to look like, without creating a greater public health concern.”

Many of the school board members and administrators who responded to the NJSBA survey were uncertain about what the future holds and what would be required of their district. Typical of many was a response from Atlantic County:

“It depends upon the criteria set out by Gov. Murphy. I feel my district is prepared and able to physically open the building and address sanitation needs, but I am unsure about virus testing measures and the ability to implement perhaps a split

day to reduce the number of students in the building at one time.”

Another respondent expressed a desire for guidance from the state:

“We {need} clear guidelines from the DOH (N.J. Department of Health), NJDOE or otherwise in regard to whether we will need to exercise social distancing; check temperatures of everyone entering the buildings daily; supply masks; and other protocols. In order to exercise social distancing, a split schedule may be needed. Supplies are back-ordered and we may not be ready to open until we have all of the necessary supplies and protocols in place.”

Steven Gardberg, business administrator for the Boonton Town Public Schools in Morris County, expressed concern that “every school district in America” will be searching for the same supplies to fight the virus, which he feared could result in shortages.

Face masks, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), cleaning supplies – what will be required to make schools safe? Less than four months from a possible reopening of schools, education leaders are not certain of the answers, Gardberg said in an April 20 NJSBA interview.

On May 3, a consortium of northeastern states [announced that they would work together](#) to purchase necessary supplies. Details, however, about what school districts would receive, in relation to what they need, are still being determined.

Other issues are also being explored in national publications and studies. Among them:

WHAT IMPACT WILL THE PANDEMIC HAVE ON STAFFING WHEN SCHOOLS REOPEN?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly a third of all public school teachers in the nation are age 50 or older, putting them at increased risk of severe COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic is exacting a toll on older adults: 92% of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. were of people ages 55 and older, as of April 27, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

An April 14 article in the [Hechinger Report](#) cited a sharp decline in teacher retention in New Orleans following the school closings caused by Hurricane Katrina. Noting the nation’s aging teacher workforce, the article warned a similar trend could develop when the current school closures, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, come to an end.

“When American schools open their doors again, more experienced, older teachers may find [that] the danger of returning to schools, while the novel coronavirus is still affecting even some of the population, is too great,” the article said. Can teachers be required to work in an environment they believe is unsafe? Where will schools find the money to hire staff to monitor a class in-person if a teacher remotely delivers a lesson that same day from home?

WILL THERE BE FOOTBALL, OTHER SPORTS AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES?

Will crowds be permitted? What about school plays or concerts? School dances? A northern New Jersey superintendent, in an interview with NJSBA, said he was aware that campus life, as students have known it, could be suspended in the fall, but he didn't want to say too much too soon. "We don't want to make things too dark for them," he said. In a [May 4 statement](#), the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) said it will "continue developing plans for the potential restarting of scholastic sports during the fall season."

TO RELIEVE OVERCROWDING, IF SCHOOLS TEACH CLASSES REMOTELY ONE DAY, AND IN PERSON THE NEXT, HOW WOULD IT WORK?

Frederick Hess, an education writer for *Forbes Magazine*, offered [suggestions about how schools could reopen](#) while adhering to social distancing guidelines.¹²

"What school reopening looks like will depend in part on available testing and technology," Hess writes. "It goes without saying that schools are not designed for social distancing... What might social distancing in schools involve? It may well require reducing the number of students in a school on a given day, either by having students attend on alternate days or by adopting a half-day model in which half the students attend in the morning and half in the afternoon. It would likely require closing gyms and having students eat lunch at their desks.

"It would probably entail measures to do away with the crowded hallways that are such a routine part of middle and high school life. Schools could have middle and high school students stay in a single classroom for the day, much as they did in elementary school, with teachers rotating in and out."

Hess acknowledges that school districts are already anticipating budget cuts and outlays for social distancing could require new expenditures. He adds that schools must take measures to protect the health of staff, including the "hundreds of thousands," who are over the age of 55 or have compromised immune systems.

Even with these challenges, it is essential to reopen public schools, he argues.

"We need to recognize that attending school in some attenuated fashion, even just two or three days a week, would be hugely beneficial for students and families. It would reconnect children and give them safer, healthier outlets for interaction," Hess explains. "It would anchor instruction, making online learning more useful. It would restore some normalcy, allow parents to start getting back to work, and help alleviate the pressures building in too many households."

In Europe, where several countries are reopening schools, there is general consensus on rules governing hygiene and social distancing, according to a [recent report](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*. These measures involve the number of students in class, changes in the traditional school schedule, and sanitary practices.¹³

"Students across Europe will be asked to refrain from physical interactions," the article says. "This means fewer pupils per class, separate entrance and exit gates,

staggered recess and lunch times, shifts throughout the day or on different days, and social-distancing in school buses. There will also be a lot more handwashing and frequent disinfections of buildings.”

“In France, government guidelines say parents should take their child’s temperature before sending them to school,” the article states. “The government also said there would be a limit of 10 children per class in preschools and 15 students per class in schools, while other countries are letting schools decide on the size of reduced classes.”

In Spain, where schools remain closed, José Ramón Repullo, head of the country’s National School of Public Health, a public health research institution, said that returning to school should be subject to criteria set by the World Health Organization.

“The framework for the safe return to school in Spain would be in September, with masks, phasing attendance, first in high school, combining face-to-face and virtual classes, and making the timetables in schools more flexible,” Repullo explained in an [April 17 article](#) in the Spanish newspaper *EL PAIS*.

WHAT DATA IS NEEDED TO ENSURE SAFETY?

To reopen schools safely in New Jersey, Gov. Murphy has pledged to make decisions driven by data, supplied by an increased capacity to test its residents for COVID-19. Murphy has pledged to double the number of tests being conducted in the state by the end of May, bringing the daily total to over 14,000, although some experts believe a much higher number is necessary.¹⁴

“I have been unwavering on the message that we need to make decisions based on science, not emotion,” Murphy said on May 4. “And while New Jersey is making great strides in mitigating the spread of COVID-19, science tells us that at this point, we can’t safely re-open our schools.”

Murphy has released a six-point recovery plan for reopening businesses and services, which includes at least 14 days of declines in new cases and in hospitalizations, increased testing capacity, and the implementation of a robust contact tracing system.¹⁵ The plan also involves “safe places and resources for isolation and quarantine,” the development of a “responsible economic restart,” including a commission to advise on the process, and preparations for the “possibility of a resurgence.”

CONTACT TRACING

In New Jersey and throughout the United States, officials have mentioned the need for contact tracing as one of the best ways to contain the spread of the virus – or to prevent another outbreak.

Contact tracing, according to published reports, was [successful in South Korea](#) and severely limited the spread of the disease.¹⁶ Contact tracing means that when a positive coronavirus case is discovered, public health departments get in touch with everyone the infected person met, so they can self-isolate and be prevented from

spreading the disease to others.

After South Korea reported its first case on Jan. 20, the *Guardian* newspaper reported, numbers initially remained low before climbing sharply, reaching a peak of 909 daily infections on Feb. 29.

“Then something extraordinary happened,” the *Guardian* reported. “The steep rise in cases [began to plateau](#). By late March, daily infections were being counted in the dozens, and then in single digits. In the space of a few weeks, South Korea had flattened the curve.”

As of late April, contact tracing was in its [very early stages in New Jersey](#), according to an April 27 article in NJSpotlight.¹⁷

“Contact tracing is the decades old, shoe-leather tactic of epidemiology,” NJSpotlight reported. “Absent universal testing, it will help fill the void. In order to tamp down future outbreaks, health officials will have to move swiftly, interviewing every person who tests positive, find out who they have been in recent contact with, interview them and isolate them. As testing capacity increases, they would test them as well.”

On May 12, Gov. Murphy announced plans to more than double the current number of individuals involved in contact tracing as part of his reopening strategy. Murphy said the state will add 1,000 contact tracers to the current 800 to 900, nj.com reported.¹⁸ State Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli has said that up to 5,000 contact tracers could be needed in New Jersey, according to nj.com.

A NEW CONCERN: SOME CHILDREN MAY BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO INFLAMMATORY SYNDROME RELATED TO COVID-19

During a May 12 hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, strongly cautioned against basing decisions to reopen schools on an assumption that children are not severely affected by COVID-19. Such thinking would be “cavalier,” he told the committee, according to [a report](#) in *The New York Times*.

Fauci warned that the virus’s effect on children is still not well understood, and that recent cases of children who have tested positive and developed a serious inflammatory syndrome was worrisome. “We really better be very careful, particularly when it comes to children,” he said.

ASSESSING PROGRESS MADE TOWARD SAFELY REOPENING SCHOOLS

On May 5, the American Academy of Pediatrics [issued a report](#)¹⁹ outlining key issues that should be considered before schools reopened. The Academy’s criteria included:

- The availability of testing by commercial and academic entities and local and state public health departments; the capacity of state and local health departments to conduct community surveillance and contact tracing.

- Implementation of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 within the school setting, such as appropriate disinfectant/sanitizing procedures; screening, monitoring, and testing for illness among staff and students; use of masks; and limiting interactions of students (e.g., having teachers, rather than students, move between classrooms). The ability to acquire necessary supplies to achieve the above strategies is critical.
- Emerging data about the role that school-aged children and adolescents play in transmission of COVID-19.
- The possibility of intermittent closures of schools in the event of COVID-19 infections.
- Establishing options for a phased re-opening, such as beginning with reduced hours or only with certain classes/grades present, to allow for monitoring the impact of the outbreak at a local level before a full reopening.

AEI STUDY: ‘BLUEPRINT FOR BACK TO SCHOOL’

On May 4, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published [a 20-page study](#), “Blueprint for Back to School,” outlining how schools should prepare to safely reopen.

Despite the uncertainty, the AEI writes, state policymakers, school leaders, and community leaders should develop plans based on the following assumptions informed by the most current guidance from public health officials:

- Schools will remain closed this spring but will reopen in the fall (*albeit* with the potential of localized, 14-to-28-day rolling closures triggered by new outbreaks).
- Reopened schools will need modifications based on guidance from national, state, and local health officials, which could include physical distancing, temperature screenings, and frequent disinfecting of classrooms.
- Accommodations will be needed for teachers, administrators, school staff, and students who may be at heightened risk from COVID-19 due to their age or other health conditions.
- A vaccine might not be available for 18 months or more, meaning that plans should take into account both the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years.

According to the AEI report, school district actions should be guided by four principles:

1. While governors have the authority to close and open schools, these decisions are best made by consulting with those closest to the problem, including local school leaders, health officials, and community leaders.
2. Schools are responsible for meeting the needs of all students, including the distinctive needs of those from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

3. Schools are obligated to find ways to serve all students, even during times of disruption when remote learning requires students to connect from home.
4. Given that school systems cannot reasonably have been expected to plan for the current situation, state and federal officials must provide the resources schools need to help weather the crisis.²⁰

REOPENING IN OTHER COUNTRIES

The experience in Europe, where schools are reopening, underscores the need to assure parents that their children and families will be safe. A [*May 12 Wall Street Journal*](#) article reported concerns among parents.

“...many parents have resisted [sending children back to school]. In Denmark, the first European country to reopen schools, thousands kept their children home, fearing the schools would become hotbeds of infections,” the article said. “In Berlin, some parents have expressed concerns about children not having to wear masks in class.”

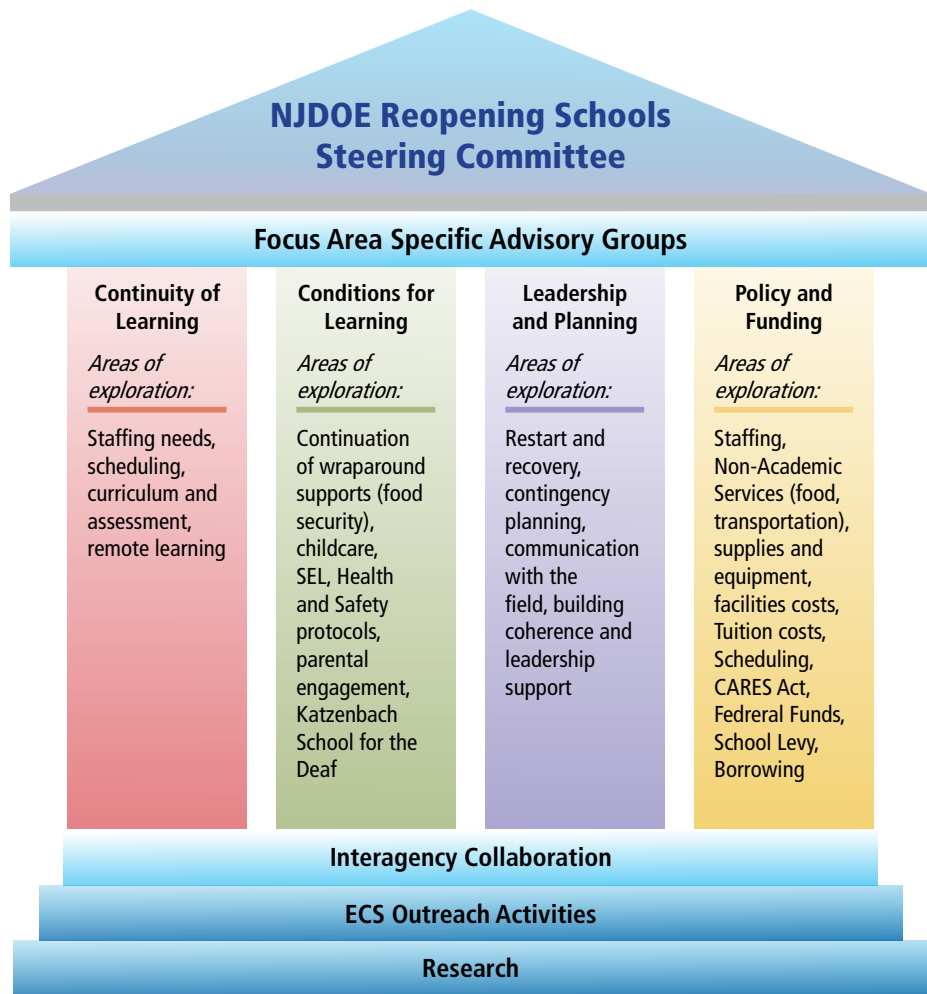
The *Wall Street Journal* reported the decision by a mother in France, where the return to school is voluntary, to keep her 10-year-old daughter home. She cited the limited in-class program designed to restrict the number of students present at one time. The result would be only six days of attendance before summer vacation. “I decided it wasn’t worth risking her health for just a few days,” the mother said.

Also cited was the impact on childcare if a parent contracts the illness due to a child’s exposure at school. For example, in Sweden, where schools never closed for children under 16, a single mother said she kept her young son home because she would not have anyone to take care of him if she contracted COVID-19.

As the statewide coordinator for the Traumatic Loss Coalition told NJSBA, the success of social distancing measures will rely on early communications with parents. ([See page 19](#))

NEW JERSEY PLANS THE REOPENING PROCESS

During a May 14 meeting with Leadership for Educational Excellence, a coalition of New Jersey’s major educational organizations including the NJSBA, Commissioner of Education Lamont Repollet outlined the structure that the state will use to chart the reopening of its public schools. The effort will include representation of all stakeholder groups. It will be structured along the lines of the Council of Chief State School Officers’ [Restart and Recovery Framework](#). The rubric includes consideration of the continuity of learning, conditions of learning including health and safety protocols, as well as policy and funding.



NEW FEDERAL SAFETY GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

On May 14, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released new guidance for schools.

CDC Guidance for Schools



The purpose of this tool is to assist administrators in making (re)opening decisions regarding K-12 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to check with state and local health officials and other partners to determine the most appropriate actions while adjusting to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the local community.

Should you consider opening?

- ✓ Will reopening be consistent with applicable state and local orders?
- ✓ Is the school ready to protect children and employees at higher risk for severe illness?
- ✓ Are you able to screen students and employees upon arrival for symptoms and history of exposure?

ANY
NO



Are recommended health and safety actions in place?

- ✓ Promote healthy hygiene practices such as hand washing and employees wearing a cloth face covering, as feasible
- ✓ Intensify cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation
- ✓ Encourage social distancing through increased spacing, small groups and limited mixing between groups, if feasible
- ✓ Train all employees on health and safety protocols

ANY
NO



Is ongoing monitoring in place?

- ✓ Develop and implement procedures to check for signs and symptoms of students and employees daily upon arrival, as feasible
- ✓ Encourage anyone who is sick to stay home
- ✓ Plan for if students or employees get sick
- ✓ Regularly communicate and monitor developments with local authorities, employees, and families regarding cases, exposures, and updates to policies and procedures
- ✓ Monitor student and employee absences and have flexible leave policies and practices
- ✓ Be ready to consult with the local health authorities if there are cases in the facility or an increase in cases in the local area

ANY
NO



ALL
YES

ALL
YES

ALL
YES

OPEN AND
MONITOR



cdc.gov/coronavirus



STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

“I think the bigger question is how are we going to emotionally care for students who have lost three, four or five people in their family, because that is a reality for some of our kids. Some of our kids are taking care of mom, the aunts and the grandmom because they all lived in the house and they got sick. It might be a middle schooler doing that type of work. Instruction is important, no doubt. But we also have children who are going through a very adult experience...”

– Christina Dalla Palu,
assistant superintendent, Dover Public Schools, Morris County²¹

In October 2019, the NJSBA released a report on mental health services in schools, [Building a Foundation for Hope](#), which found students in New Jersey and the nation “are in emotional trouble, with anxiety reaching near epidemic levels. As many as one in eight children – and 25% of teens – are contending with diagnosable anxiety disorders.”

Even before the coronavirus closed schools and disrupted the lives of students and families, the task force found that 2,731 young people, ages 10 to 24, were treated in hospital emergency rooms in New Jersey for attempted suicide or self-inflicted injuries in 2013 through 2015, the latest statistics available. Within the same age group, 283 suicides were reported.

The task force report included more than 70 recommendations about how school districts could work with mental health professionals and build alliances with their communities to address the emotional well-being of every child.

Dr. James McLaughlin, superintendent of the Dover Public Schools, said his staff is committed to the education of the “whole child” and they realize that students learn best when they feel safe and supported. At the same time, the 2.5-square-mile community of Dover, population 18,200, has been devastated by the crisis. On May 15, the Dover website reported 647 cases in the community, including 46 deaths.

Assistant Superintendent Dalla Palu said, “We’ve had teachers who’ve reached out to let us know that they held their first Google meet with their kids, and all they did was let the kids talk.

“They needed to have that hour to get face time and talk to one another. They scrapped the algebra lesson for that day, and we said that’s great. That’s what you need to do because that’s what the kids need right now. Instruction will happen. We’ll get everybody caught up. But we need to be sure that the staff is equipped to deal with some of the issues the kids have been through.”²²

REACHING STUDENTS AT RISK

In the May 6 issue of *Education Week*, Kathleen Minke, executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists, described how mental health professionals are offering services remotely.

“Many school psychologists have now turned their attention to figuring out what services they can provide ethically and effectively using technology. They have provided virtual telehealth counseling, helped teachers adapt behavior-management strategies to a Zoom classroom, and created social-emotional-learning lessons for the home context,” Minke wrote.²³

“Reaching the students and families at serious risk for harmful behaviors is one of the most urgent concerns facing school psychologists right now. How do we protect students who experience domestic violence and abuse, given the increasing stress on families? How do we support students with existing or emerging mental-health problems? School psychologists are figuring out how to conduct effective suicide-risk threat assessments when students threaten harm to self or others, and how to access supports and treatment for these youths.

“There is little doubt that there will be substantial increases in mental- and behavioral-health problems for students and adults when schools reopen their physical buildings,” Minke continued. “Everyone has been affected by this pandemic, and we all remain at risk from the virus and resulting economic strains. But while every school has been touched by this pandemic, the effects will not be equally distributed. Schools already stressed by limited resources, high poverty rates, or other recent crises likely will experience the greatest difficulty.”

Minke proposed the following four-point plan to help districts begin to address their mental health needs when classes resume meeting in-person:

1. **Develop a long-term recovery plan.** Do not rely on individual building principals or school psychologists to create and implement support plans. District leadership is needed to ensure that a multitiered system of support addressing both academic skills and emotional and behavioral health is available to all students and adults in each building.
2. **Assess, don't assume.** All schools will face challenges, but they won't be the same challenges. Structured needs assessments that identify the specific difficulties that students and staff face will guide intervention. Prepare comprehensive universal supports and methods to identify those who require more intensive interventions. The assessment process should be ongoing, recognizing that some students (and adults) will seem fine upon return to school only to demonstrate setbacks a few months into recovery.
3. **Develop a resource map.** Identify qualified mental- and behavioral-health service providers in each school and make sure their jobs are structured so that they have time to devote to such services. School psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers should be on the front lines of this work. Identify gaps in needed services and seek community supports to fill those gaps. Recognize that community service providers will be experiencing increased demand and may not be as available as they were before the

pandemic. Also, many families may have lost health insurance and will find it difficult to bear the cost of treatment outside of school.

4. **Provide professional development and emotional care for adults.** Educators will be facing enormous responsibility to recognize signs of anxiety, depression, and trauma in their students. They also will be managing ongoing challenges in their own families. Districts should provide professional development that teaches trauma-informed practices and a robust protocol for identifying and supporting students in need. Consider how to build flexibility and support into the workday so that educators can engage in effective self-care.

GUIDANCE FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [report](#) in early May included guidance on mental health services that school districts should consider.

- School mental health professionals are critical in shaping messages to students and families about school re-entry including addressing anxiety, (and) social acclimation. Schools are encouraged to adopt an approach of universal services for mental health support for all students. Teachers and other school personnel should receive training on how to talk to and support children during a pandemic and principles of psychological first aid.
- Students requiring more mental health support, including those who are exhibiting suicidal ideation, should be referred for additional services. Support should be provided to grieving students as well as those experiencing other losses (e.g., missed experiences). Schools are encouraged to contact students who do not return to school, as they may be experiencing school avoidance due to anxiety related to the pandemic.

Schools should be attuned to the broader social and family stressors that may affect a student's ability to attend school or be ready to learn. Schools need to incorporate academic accommodations and supports for students who may still be having difficulty concentrating or learning new information due to stress associated with the pandemic into planning considerations."²⁴

RUTGERS TRAUMATIC LOSS COALITION

FREE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

During the COVID-19 crisis, school districts may suffer a loss of a staff member or student. The Rutgers Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth offers free resources and assistance in the event of such an event. Assistance can range from phone consultation and support to the provision of on-site services. Each county has a coordinator; contact information is [listed here](#) or is available at www.njsba.org/FreeMentalHealthServices.

Maureen Brogan, statewide coordinator of the Traumatic Loss Coalition, said it might take some time for students, especially younger students, to adapt to the "new normal" of potential restrictions.²⁵ If students are required to wear masks in

school, some may wonder why.

“It may make younger children think, ‘Are we still not safe because we’re wearing masks?’” she said, adding that it may take some time before students and teachers stop reacting every time someone in the classroom coughs or sneezes.

“Younger children rely on facial expressions,” she said. She wondered whether it would be harder for teachers to communicate if students can’t see their faces.

She thought children could be encouraged to wear pictures of themselves to help them say, “that’s my face, even though part of my face may be blocked.”

The success of social distancing measures, she said, will rely on early communications with parents.

“Fear is fueled by uncertainty,” she said. By involving parents, teachers and staff “early in the process,” school leaders can help their educational communities feel safe and secure, and no one will be surprised when school opens and new social distancing measures are put in place. Children take their cues from parents, she said, and if parents reassure them, children are more likely to accept what they’re required to do.

“This is really difficult,” she said. “Are we going to make mistakes? Absolutely. We’re going to learn and get better. . . . These are uncertain, challenging times, but New Jersey has a lot of expertise. If we tap into the resources we have, I know we’re going to be okay.”



ACADEMIC ISSUES

Questions concerning teachers, health care workers, bus drivers need answers

- Before the uneven quality of online learning during the pandemic is assessed;
- Before agreement can be reached on suitable tests that will identify how far behind some children fell while schools were closed;
- Before remedial plans can be administered to restore students to their proper academic standing, important questions must be resolved before learning can begin again.

Who will drive students to school? A national bus driver shortage²⁶ could be exacerbated by the need for more drivers to cover split sessions, if that is the option districts choose to address overcrowding. Even before the pandemic, in February, *School Transportation News* reported that 80% of school bus companies and school districts surveyed were having trouble finding enough drivers. In New Jersey, the minimum time to obtain a license is 34 days, provided that the process, including criminal history record checks and other requirements, goes well and/or is expedited. If split sessions require the rapid-fire hire of more drivers, consider this: It can take months of often-unpaid training for drivers to earn a Commercial Driver's License (CDL), according to *School Transportation News*.

Who will meet the increased demand to monitor students' health? If teachers, parents and staff are to be convinced that classrooms are safe, who will monitor students' health when there is one nurse available for every 533 students in New Jersey²⁷ – and many of them are already busy monitoring medications students were routinely taking before the crisis. If students will need their health symptoms monitored, and their temperatures taken, who will do the monitoring and record the results?

Will there be enough teachers to staff the classrooms? Assuming students can get to school and their health is appropriately monitored, who will teach the classes? With one-third of the teachers in the nation over 50 years old,²⁸ will teachers and staff be convinced that it is safe to return to work, or will waves of retirements and sick days diminish the workforce at the same time that more teachers are needed?

“For teachers who are immunocompromised – perhaps have asthma, diabetes or heart disease that puts them at a higher risk of having a severe infection – or who live with family members who are high-risk, the decision to physically return to

the classroom is complicated,” said *U.S. News & World Report*.²⁹ Teachers need to decide if it’s safe to return, and their decision could “radically change how learning happens. Students in classrooms could end up with a teacher on a video screen rather than in person,” according to *U.S. News & World Report* – assuming the school district has the budget to have an aide staff the classroom when the teacher is unable to attend.

Education Week explored the issue on May 7 by examining the plight of Cossondra George, a middle school math teacher in Newberry, Mich., who has asthma and will turn 59 in August.³⁰ She is troubled by the thought of returning to school in the fall, and she’s worried about how to keep six feet of distance between everyone in a crowded classroom. At the same time, continuing to teach remotely does not appeal to her. She has been frustrated with online learning, and said she believes it doesn’t match the instruction she can provide face-to-face.

“Even so, ‘I’m not ready to retire, I’m just not,’” George told *Education Week*. “I love what I do. ... I don’t want somebody else to make that decision, and I don’t want my health to make that decision.”

Offering early retirement to at-risk teachers or staff has been proposed by the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank in Washington. [According to the AEI report](#), this could also be a cost-saving measure for districts, which are expected to face steep budget cuts that could lead to teacher layoffs.

“You want it to be one option among multiple options,” said Frederick Hess, the director of education policy studies at AEI and one of the authors of the report. “I don’t really want to see us pushing educators out of the profession. That’s not preferred.”

Ideally, he said, districts could reassign at-risk teachers to jobs that could be done from home, such as one-on-one remote tutoring or mentoring. This might mean changing teachers’ job descriptions, which could require negotiations between the teachers’ union and the school district, said Hess, who also writes an opinion blog on edweek.org.

Still, early retirement would be “better than layoffs,” Hess said. And the priority, he said, should be on reopening schools quickly. “It’s hard to argue that kids and families should have their schools remain closed when 75% to 80% of adults are not at risk.”

MARYLAND, CALIFORNIA EASE HIRING REQUIREMENTS FOR NEW TEACHERS

As school communities around the country closed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, a great deal of uncertainty and unfinished business remains. Chief among this list of outstanding to-dos: hiring teachers for the next school year.

“April is peak hiring time,” Kelly Coash-Johnson, executive director of American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA), told *Education Week* in a March 20 story.³¹ But this year, few prospective job seekers and employers will be meeting in person. Already, 95% of the nation’s career fairs for school personnel

have been canceled, reports AASPA's Coash-Johnson.

In California and Maryland, state agencies have taken action to help their teaching candidates get jobs, even if they have not been able to complete the normally required student teaching hours or certification tests.

The [California Commission on Teacher Credentialing](#) voted April 23 to allow university teacher preparation programs to decide when teacher candidates are prepared for the classroom, even if they haven't completed their student teaching, according to *EdSource*.³² California expects 26,000 educators and clinicians to graduate this school year. The majority are studying to get their teaching credential.

California commissioners voted to temporarily waive the 600 hours of student teaching normally required to earn a teaching credential. It will allow university faculty in the program where the student teacher is enrolled to decide how many hours each candidate needs, *EdSource* reported.

In Maryland, the state board of education took preliminary action on April 28 to help teacher candidates get jobs even if they haven't completed the hours of training necessary to get their certification. The "emergency certificate" must still go through the state's emergency regulatory review process before taking effect. Details of Maryland's action are available on page 16 of [Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education](#), released on May 5.

SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE CHAIR URGES STATE TO PROVIDE MORE INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Once districts find a way to safely get students to school, monitor their health and staff the classrooms, districts can begin to assess how much learning occurred while school buildings were closed.

Led by state Sen. Teresa Ruiz, chair of the Senate Education Committee, the task force will address a variety of topics, including overcoming the digital divide, mitigating learning loss, offering resources to improve at-home special education instruction and providing assistance for students who have Individual Education Plans or are English Language Learners.

NJSBA is represented on the task force. It will also discuss support for social emotional learning and mental health care, maintaining health and safety now and once students and teachers return to the classroom, ensuring students have access to healthy meals, and determining tools to help teachers, parents, and students measure academic progress and determine areas in need of attention, according to the May 5 edition of online *School Board Notes*.

ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In a recent request for information from the New Jersey Department of Education, Senator Ruiz asked how the state will assess students' academic progress, or lack thereof, while school buildings were closed. Her letter also asks for data related to students' access to the technology necessary for remote instruction:

- The number of students who do not have access to a computer or device;
- The districts that are providing their students with devices and whether they are meeting the full needs of their enrolled population;
- The number of students without reliable broadband access.

MAP GROWTH TOOL USED TO MEASURE STUDENT LEARNING DEFICITS

In an interview, Vicky Flynn, president of the Holmdel Board of Education in Monmouth County, told the NJSBA she was confident that her district's students were doing well with online learning. Her district already used the [MAP Growth](#) program to quickly assess students' learning deficits so they can be helped.

Nonetheless, there are so many unanswered questions, she said, and very little time to get answers and make plans.³³ She expressed the need for more direction from the state.

SPECIAL EDUCATION SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Setting up online learning for the 55 million students in the nation who were forced out of school by the coronavirus pandemic is a challenge, but it's even more of a challenge to figure out how to best reach the 7 million students in the country with disabilities. And those students, who are less likely to be able to access online education, are also at much greater risk of falling behind.

"The reality is that most likely whenever kids go back to school after the coronavirus, there is going to be regression for all kids," Miriam Rollin, director of the Education Civil Rights Alliance, told *U.S. News & World Report*. "But the problem is kids with disabilities are starting further behind and they're likely to regress even more."³⁴

In New Jersey, those who work with the state's population of about 200,000 special needs students say they are making great progress but acknowledge that it has been difficult to provide services to all students who need them.

"I'm not trying to sugarcoat this in any way. The caregivers and the teachers and the behavior specialists are charged with providing as much support as they can, but there are going to be challenges for some kids, we can't deny that," said Peggy McDonald, assistant commissioner for student services at the New Jersey Department of Education, in a March 20 interview with NJSpotlight.com.³⁵

"The guidance from the U.S Department of Education is not that you need to review the IEP for this time, but to provide what is in the IEP to the greatest extent possible," McDonald said. "Districts will have to look once they are back in school at whether the student has regressed or not, and determine whether compensatory services may be required. Hopefully going forward, we'll be able to give more guidance on that."

Dr. Gerry Crisonino, director of special services for the Jersey City Public Schools, and a member of the NJSBA Special Education Committee, said services rapidly improved once the State Board of Education approved the delivery of online services

to special education students on April 1.

“Our teaching staff has been amazing,” said Dr. Crisonino. “They’ve been able to implement this overnight. If in the fall this has to happen, I think we’re well-prepared.”

Dr. Crisonino, who is also a school board member in Berkeley Heights in Union County, said speech therapy has been delivered to more than 1,000 special education students in Jersey City.³⁶ Several years ago, the city worked with Verizon to extend online service to areas of the city that needed it, he said.

Though he has been inspired by the level of effort to create online programs for special needs students throughout the state, Dr. Crisonino acknowledged that challenges remain to be resolved. For example, it may be a difficult adjustment for some students with autism if they are required to wear facemasks to protect themselves and others from the virus.

“Students who have some form of autism may have sensory issues, and they may not want something on their face,” he said, adding that he is hopeful that parents will work with their children at home to help them become accustomed to wearing the masks, if necessary.



BUDGETARY ISSUES

Gov. Murphy is predicting layoffs of “historic” proportions unless Congress approves more federal aid for states and schools, and unless Trenton legislators approve his plan to borrow billions, despite questions about whether such borrowing violates provisions of the state’s constitution.³⁷

On May 13, state Treasurer Elizabeth Muoio predicted a \$2.8 billion revenue loss for the current fiscal year and a \$7.3 billion shortfall in 2021.

“These revenue projections are based upon a wide variety of economic assumptions, including the assumption that there will not be a resurgence of COVID-19 cases later this year,” Muoio said in a statement.

The governor’s public comments over the past few weeks have painted a consistently grim picture.

“The fact of the matter is we are going to have serious cash flow challenges,” Murphy said on April 16, according to nj.com.³⁸ “Folks should assume we’re going to have to gut programs. And that will affect everybody in this entire state... If we want to both address our cash flow challenges as well as keep our best public schools in the country, keep our full ranks of public responders, all of that would be in jeopardy if we don’t find the capital.”

As the state budget continues to evolve, there are several key dates ahead:

- **May 22:** By this date, the state Treasurer will release a detailed budget analysis, showing the impact of declining revenue collections.³⁹
- **Aug. 25:** On or before this date, the governor is required to deliver a new state budget proposal, covering Oct. 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021.
- **Sept. 30:** By law, the Legislature and governor are required to finalize the new state budget, covering Oct. 1 through June 30, 2021.

Other legislative proposals could affect the fortunes of New Jersey’s school districts. Senate Bill 2392 and Assembly Bill 3969, approved by the Legislature on May 14, would authorize the Department of Community Affairs to permit municipalities to delay or alter the transmission of property tax revenue to school districts during gubernatorial-declared emergencies, such as the state’s current situation.

NJSBA believes that the legislation would place a severe strain on school district finances and educational programs.

Another bill, A-3904, enacted on April 14, requires boards of education to pay stipends, salaries and fees for services that are not being provided during the school closure. A proposal by Senate President Steve Sweeney, the Employee Job-

Sharing Furlough Protection Act, could help mitigate the impact of A-3904 by allowing school districts to apply federal emergency relief funds to supplement unemployment compensation for staff. NJSBA believes that the proposal has the potential to save school districts significant amounts of money should they choose to implement a job-sharing furlough program.

On May 11, the New Jersey Department of Education announced that the state will receive \$310 million through the Elementary, Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. A major focus of the ESSER Fund is the purchase of technology, including internet access, hardware and software. It can help close the digital divide – that is, differences in the access to technology among communities and families because of their economic status.

Of the total, \$280 million will be available to school districts, based on community need as indicated by eligibility for Title I funding. (An additional \$30 million will be allocated to the state Department of Education for distribution to districts.)

In addition, to technology, the funding may be applied to sanitization and cleaning supplies, mental health support, summer learning and supplemental after-school programs including online instruction, and the distribution of meals for eligible students.

School districts must apply for the funding by June 19, according to a [notice from New Jersey Department of Education](#).

Additional funding now under consideration in Congress includes \$500 billion in aid for state and local governments, part of the next comprehensive rescue package, which has bipartisan sponsorship.⁴⁰ Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana want to establish the fund to help the states hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The money would be divided into three pools and distributed according to formulas that reflect population, infection rates and revenue loss. Governors and mayors across the country have been pleading with the federal government for additional aid as tax revenues plummet and demands for resources skyrocket.⁴¹

A top economic advisor to President Trump, however, said May 8 that negotiations over the next coronavirus relief package won't resume until late May or early June.⁴²

On May 15, the House of Representatives passed a \$3 trillion aid package to help states, cities, and households address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, according to a [Wall Street Journal article](#), the Secretary of the Treasury said that the federal government should wait “a few weeks” to see how the previous federal aid package is working before providing more funding. In addition, the Senate Majority Leader was highly critical of the House package.

A \$7.5 BILLION PROPOSAL TO RESOLVE INTERNET CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

Longer term, proponents of extending internet connectivity are advocating for \$7.5 billion to provide additional funding for the existing federal E-rate program for

public schools and libraries. According to an April 23 report prepared by Funds for Learning, LLC, 7.15 million families in the United States are without internet access and are unable to attend online classes.

The group maintains that \$7.5 billion could significantly address this gap in this way:

- \$4.29 billion for off-campus internet connections.
- \$1.79 billion for connected learning devices, such as laptops.
- \$1.46 billion for cybersecurity to keep networks up and running.

“Congress and the FCC can take action to get those students connected to the internet and into online school now, and in the years to come,” according to the group’s [report](#).⁴³

The National School Boards Association, meanwhile, is calling on the House of Representatives to advance legislation, H.R. 6563, to expand internet access for students.

H.R. 6563 would create a \$2 billion “Emergency Connectivity Fund” for schools and libraries to secure Wi-Fi hotspots, modems, routers and connected devices. It would support distance and remote learning for “millions of students without home internet access” for the duration of the COVID-19 emergency, according to the NSBA.⁴⁴

The program would be administered through the Federal Communications Commission’s E-rate program.

In an April 22 letter, a coalition of more than 50 education organizations, including NSBA, cited the E-rate program’s “successful equity-based 22-year history of keeping public and private schools and public libraries connected to the internet.” The correspondence was addressed to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and New Jersey Congressman Frank Pallone, chair of the energy and commerce committee, among others.

The coalition pointed to recent reports showing the “digital divide” or “homework gap” in states as economically diverse as Mississippi and Massachusetts. “This inequity among students who have internet at home and those who don’t have kept several million students from participating in their education as it has moved online,” states the group’s letter.



PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

What if the virus returns in the fall or the winter? Schools and administrators, even as they face unprecedented challenges should schools reopen in September, are already tasked with preparing to close again if health conditions warrant.

“We don’t have a single member who is not planning for some amount of distance learning next year,” said Mike Magee, the CEO of Chiefs for Change, a nonprofit network of district and state education leaders from across the country. “These things are impossible to predict, but it would be foolish not to have a system ready, if in fact you need to continue distance learning or if you have to return students to distance learning at some point next year.”⁴⁵

Even as the number of people hospitalized is declining, Gov. Murphy has said the state must prepare for a second wave of the coronavirus.

“If this virus returns like a lot of other viruses, you could see it come back in the late fall or early winter,” Murphy told reporters on April 22.⁴⁶

The American Enterprise Institute’s May 5 report, “Blueprint for Back to School,” says that “states, districts, and schools need to develop clear protocols regarding potential rolling closures. Plans for reopening all recognize that there may be need for rolling closures (probably of 14–28 days) if trigger points are breached. It must be clear who will make such a determination and how the decision-making process will work.

“Schools must develop protocols and partnerships with public health authorities to effectuate ‘contact tracing’ strategies – with the aim of knowing at any given point which students or teachers warrant special distancing protections or testing,” the AEI report continues. “Schools should also prepare for possible reporting of other health indicators, such as student absenteeism, students who present a fever, or students whose parents or guardians have been diagnosed with COVID-19.”

A NEED FOR INCREASED TESTING

In a May 10 editorial,⁴⁷ the *Star-Ledger* said reopening of the state “can only take place after we know we are prepared to contain a second wave of infections that experts warn is almost inevitable. That means New Jersey must dramatically expand its testing capacity...”

School reopening strategies proposed by AEI and the federal CDC both require increased testing and contact tracing. As described on [page 10](#) of this report, contact tracing means that whenever the virus is discovered in a school or

community, all of the people who had contact with the infected person are quarantined. In the absence of a vaccine or effective treatment, it is a key strategy to keep the virus isolated, so that it does not spread and require a long-term shutdown of a school, community or state.

FALL SPORTS, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Fall sports and extracurricular activities are an important part of traditional school life. In an informal survey of football coaches and officials in New Jersey and around the nation, national cbssports.com writer Mitch Stephens asked if football and other high school sports would be played in the fall.

“If social distancing rules still apply in the fall,” Stephens wrote on May 8, “it’s hard to imagine fans will be allowed. If so, will there be a limit? Will cheerleaders, student body and band members be allowed? Without any or all, the pageantry and magic of the game will suffer.”⁴⁸ He pointed out that football makes a significant amount of money for school athletic programs, and that students whose spring sports programs were canceled because of the virus might need extra time to prepare.

When it canceled high school sports in the spring, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association said it would turn its attention to preparing for the fall season.

“We need to do everything in our power to salvage the fall sports season,” said Sen. Paul Sarlo, a Bergen County Democrat who also serves on the NJSIAA Executive Committee. “Losing the spring high school sports season is one of the largest disruptions in our society. In my opinion, it’s too soon to try and pin down a start date (for fall sports), but I encourage the NJSIAA and the conferences around the state to begin conversations and formulation of plans for potential start dates, whether it’s July 15, Aug. 1, Aug. 15 or not at all. Those conversations should begin sooner rather than later.”⁴⁹

Sarlo and Senate Education Committee Chair Teresa Ruiz have introduced legislation, [S-2383](#), that would offer a “bridge year,” to students whose athletic careers or extracurricular activities were curtailed by health-related school shutdowns. The bill, approved May 14 by the full state Senate, would have the Commissioner of Education establish a three-year “Bridge Year Pilot Program” for students graduating high school in 2021 and 2022.⁵⁰

While the plan could aid student athletes, Sen. Sarlo said it is “academically driven” because it provides students the opportunity to go to college at a reduced rate to take courses to prepare them for a four-year college, retake SATs to improve their scores and return to their high school to play a spring sport or participate in a school activity they missed out on this year.

The bridge year would benefit students by retaining eligibility for school activities important to career opportunities, such as drama clubs, filmmaking, foreign language clubs and intra-murals. Under the proposal, students would only be able to play spring sports for the school they attended junior year and must meet the age participation requirements of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Association.

They would have to declare for the bridge year before the beginning of the second semester of their senior year.

CONCLUSION: MEETING A CHALLENGE OF UNPRECEDENTED MAGNITUDE

New Jersey's local school leaders and educators have gone beyond all expectations in continuing instruction during the school closings forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking toward our schools reopening, the challenges – academically, financially, socially, logistically – eclipse those involved in the school closings. But, as evidenced in this report, they can be met with guidance and support from the state and federal governments, the commitment of local board of education members, superintendents and other district leaders, and the dedication of our educators and support staff.

Above all else, student learning, well-being and success must be at the heart of all our decisions.

The New Jersey School Boards Association believes that the best practices, experiences, and concerns emphasized in this report will have a strong and positive impact as our state develops a process to reopen its schools.

For updated information, visit the New Jersey School Boards Association's COVID-19 Resource Center at www.njsba.org/COVID-19.



NOTES

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