



Collaborating in a Crisis: Working Together to Safely Reopen Our School Buildings

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis has created enormous challenges for our nation's public school systems. Almost overnight, schools were asked to move their entire operation online, including not only teaching and learning, but also the myriad other physical and social supports that families access through their school system. In a crisis, immediate decisions need to be made quickly, and they were. However, as the nation moves toward reopening its public spaces and considers the coming school year, there are many lingering questions and concerns to address. One primary concern is funding. Because of the inevitable stress on state budgets based on economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis, it is imperative that federal and state governments take action to ensure that school systems have the resources required to meet students' needs in the months to come. Other concerns are more local. While parents are very supportive of educators and public schools right now, if school systems do not use this summer to put a comprehensive plan in place for the coming year – one that thoughtfully balances educational goals with families' health, economic, and social realities – we are likely to see a limit to the public's goodwill. It is especially important as local school boards and administrators begin to review critical budget and policy implications in the coming weeks. As such, administrators, school board members, and other system leaders would benefit from a decision-making approach that includes the voices and experience of multiple stakeholders.

District administrators, unions/education associations, and other community stakeholders can and should work together toward mutual goals to support all students. The COVID-19 crisis demands that stakeholders focus on a shared goal of successfully reopening our school buildings. It therefore offers opportunities to develop meaningful and lasting partnerships, even among entities that have not yet built a history of trust. Collaborative education partnerships begin with an agreement made by administrators, union/education association leaders and other education stakeholders to “start somewhere” – to pick an issue of shared interest, and begin working together to address it. As we face the effects of a global pandemic, never has there been a clearer place to start.

The National Labor-Management Partnership (NLMP), a coalition that includes the national associations for the nation's educators, administrators, and school boards, issued a Call to Action in 2018, urging such collaboration. Heeding this call, the National Education Association and its partners developed a set of resources to foster collaboration between stakeholder groups, including a collaborative partnerships framework. In this model, districts and schools create a leadership team that guides and oversees a set of working groups on specific issues or topics.

“Opening schools post-COVID is about so much more than just opening doors. The only way we succeed is if educators—teachers, principals, board members, and superintendents—work collaboratively to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment for staff and students. ”

- Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA, The School Superintendents Association

When it comes to the topic of reopening our school buildings, the following example may prove useful to districts seeking to employ collaborative decision-making practices to create a comprehensive school reopening plan. There is much that remains to be seen about our nation’s recovery from the pandemic, but it is already clear that we will not be returning to “normal” in the fall. School systems’ reopening plans will need to address many aspects of public health and education, and include scenarios for multiple teaching-and-learning formats.

Example: Collaboration Matrix for Reopening School Buildings

District Leadership Team or COVID Task Force:

Purpose/Role: Oversee and support working groups to design various aspects of the district’s reopening plan. Create and implement a communication plan to monitor the progress of the working groups, and to keep stakeholders apprised of progress toward reopening. Advocate for protected education funding mechanisms, coordinate budgets, and seek additional resources as needed.

Example of Team Composition: Superintendent and senior administrators (e.g., Assistant Superintendents of Operations, Technology Services, Human Resources, Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education, English Language Learners, etc.); Union/Education Association President and Executive Board; School Board liaison; President of PTA Council or other parent group; Community representatives, particularly those representing historically marginalized populations

Key Tasks:

- Establish the District Leadership Team, setting group norms and expectations
- Clarify the main goal (e.g. creating a comprehensive reopening plan) and timeline
- Identify the categories of decisions to be made, and assign a working group for each one
- Create a communication structure between working groups and the leadership team, with the intention of monitoring the support needs of each group and ensuring each group’s success
- Create a communication structure with the community at large, to keep them apprised of progress

Working Groups:

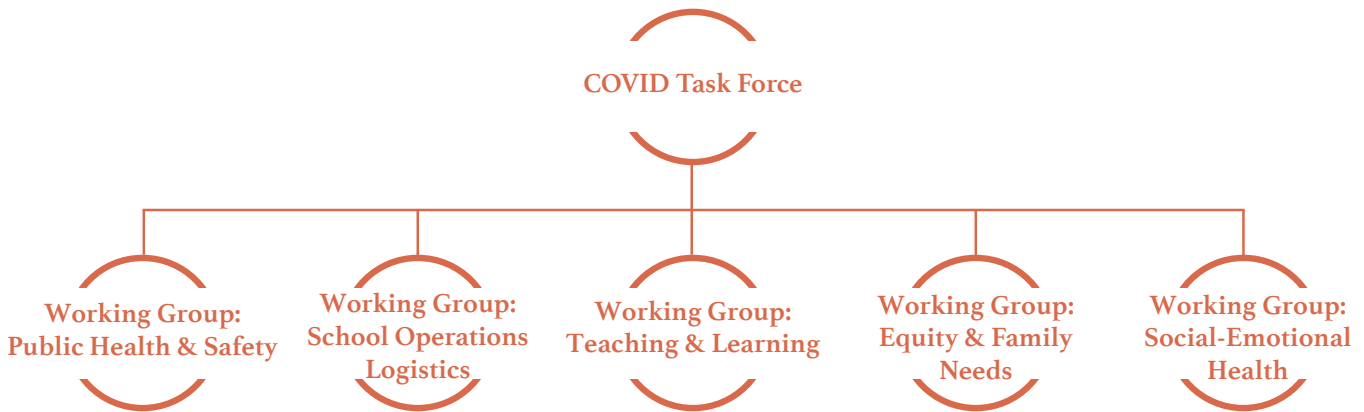
Each working group has the same goals: Identify existing challenges and needs in its assigned topic related to reopening schools. Engage stakeholders to learn their ideas and priorities. Consider multiple potential plans of action, including the logistics and resources involved, and make a set of policy recommendations to the Leadership Team.

Example of Team Composition: Each working group is co-chaired by a district administrator (Central Office or principal) and an educator nominated by the education association. Together, the co-chairs select educators and administrators to serve on the working group, with priority given to those closest to the topic. Parent and community members with interest and expertise in the topic should also be included.

Key Tasks:

- Establish the working group, setting group norms and expectations
- Clarify the goal of the group and how it contributes to the overarching district goal, and the timeline
- Conduct a needs analysis, engaging as many stakeholders as possible in the time allowed
- Draft a prioritized list of issues to be addressed, and explore potential options
- Analyze options, and develop a list of recommendations for the leadership team

Collaboration Matrix and Key Questions for Working Groups to Address in their Recommendations



I. Public Health and Safety

- What COVID symptoms screening measures make sense for the school community (e.g. temperature monitoring, mandatory testing, etc.), and what are the logistics of doing them?
- What will happen when a student or staff member tests positive? How will they be isolated and their contacts tracked? What number or scenario would trigger a need to close a school and move back to online instruction again?
- How will the school system communicate with families about students who have had contact with confirmed cases? How will non-COVID health issues during the school day (where a student ordinarily would have been sent to the nurse’s office) be handled?
- Is there sufficient personal protective equipment to make sure educators stay safe, particularly education support professionals? Will masks be required for educators and students?
- What are the school deep-cleaning needs of this time and moving forward after reopening, and how will we meet these needs in ways that do not over-burden school janitorial staff? What are the procedures for sanitizing handles/rails, play equipment, and students’ hands throughout the day?
- What mechanisms are available for educators to voice safety concerns or workplace issues without fear of retaliation or discipline?

- If implemented, how will the increased health and safety recommendations cost, and how will any cost increases be funded?

2. School Operations Logistics

- Do adjustments need to be made to the school calendar?
- To increase social distance within the school setting, what are the logistics involved with reducing class size? Could split scheduling (alternating days of the week or times of day) be a feasible strategy? What additional space (mobile classrooms, etc.) would we need? Are there sufficient numbers of educators to meet the need? How much will any proposed increase to physical space or personnel cost, and how will those cost increases be funded?
- What are the logistics involved with safe school transportation? How will the district decrease the number of students on school buses, or limit students' use of public transit? Are there enough bus drivers to meet the need if the district decides to hold multiple school sessions for different sets of students during the day?
- What are the times of day when students congregate, and what changes do we need to make to decrease the number of students together in common spaces? How will we safely serve school lunch? How will we minimize student contact at lunch and recess? How will we modify fine arts, performing arts, and physical education classes?
- If staff members are sick and need to be absent or work from home for a period of time, how will they be supported to do so without disruption to students? How will substitutes or work sharing be ensured?
- If parents of some students decide it is not safe for their children to attend school, will educators be expected to simultaneously teach face-to-face and virtually?

“Our nation’s students deserve a well-designed, thoughtful plan for reopening school buildings. The nation’s families are counting on all of us - administrators, educators, and community members - and we must work together to keep them safe.”

***- Lily Eskelsen García, President,
National Education Association***

3. Teaching and Learning During Emergency Remote Learning

- What are the district’s expectations for in-person instruction, online face-to-face instruction, and independent learning time? What opportunities will students have to interact with their classmates?
- To what extent were the technological solutions implemented in the Spring effective in meeting the needs of educators, students, and families? To what extent were those solutions ineffective or inadequate? Which students were unable or unwilling to participate in online activity? What modifications might we need to make in regards to technology platforms and norms when school buildings reopen?
- What are the expectations for educators about following curricular guides and meeting grade-

level standards during emergency remote learning? What diagnostic assessments and data will teachers use to obtain the critical information they need about student progress without taking away valuable and limited instructional time? How will educators determine which students have not made sufficient progress during the school closures, and what additional supports will be available for remediation?

- What expectations will school districts set for teachers and students about reviewing and grading student work?
- How will students' unique needs be differentiated during emergency remote learning? What guidance will the district provide educators about how to review, revise, and/or meet the IEP of students with disabilities? How will the district meet the needs of English Learners during emergency remote learning?
- How will teachers' professional development and collaboration time be structured? What opportunities will exist for educators to collaborate and engage in professional development to prepare for the sudden switch to remote learning during a national health emergency? How will lessons learned during emergency remote learning be used to build best practices for future interruptions of learning in public school buildings?
- What models will we use to provide mentoring and performance feedback to educators in this time? Will formal evaluations be put on hold?
- What supports will be put in place for new teachers?

4. Equity and Family/Community Needs

- In what ways should we shift our usual choices and decision-making to address racial equity during conversations about re-opening public school buildings?
- How will we assess and meet students' and educators' personal technology needs? How will we meet 1:1 electronic device ratios? What partnerships or programs might increase students' and educators' access to home broadband internet services capable of multiple video feeds?
- How will families' food needs be met? How can the food services most effectively switch back and forth between in-school and remote models?
- How will students' after-school program needs be met? What are the plans for clubs, sports,

“School board members and other public school leaders have managed a herculean task to serve students during the pandemic. With the new school year approaching, it is imperative to provide public education leaders with key questions and options to consider so they can prepare their buildings so students are safe when they are able to return. The guide is offered to spark ideas and actions as well as to facilitate dialogue in community so that they can elevate opportunities for greater collaboration and transparency.”

- Anna Maria Chávez, Executive Director & Chief Executive Officer, National School Boards Association

and other after- school enrichment activities (that parents often rely on)? What partnerships can we use or develop to meet these needs?

- How will our school system maintain and support individual relationships and a sense of connectedness with the families we serve?
- What additional supports might our educators (both certified and classified staff) need to be able to work, given their own COVID-related challenges at home? How can we provide and/or connect our educators to wraparound supports, that will in turn enable them to meet our students' and families' needs? If implemented, what will these support recommendations cost, and how will they be funded?

“COVID-19 has upended our lives in so many ways, further exposing the inequities in our society and completely rearranging schooling for students, families, educators, administrators and parents alike. We believe the question on reopening is not whether, but when and how we can reopen our schools safely and responsibly in a way that puts health and wellbeing paramount. This is all uncharted territory, and doing this work well requires us to collaborate like never before. Together, we can make a plan for schools to work in our new reality.

***- Randi Weingarten, President,
American Federation of Teachers***

5. Social-Emotional Health

- In what ways will school leaders ensure that there is time set aside during the first week of re-opening the school buildings for students and educators to grieve, heal, re-connect, and strengthen the in-school community before the focus on instruction begins?
- What mental health supports will be available for students and educators who are struggling due to COVID and its public health response?
- How will educators be trained to identify students struggling with trauma, and ensure they receive support?
- What will a trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive school culture look like in each school building?
- How will we ensure sufficient specialized instructional support personnel (school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) to address students' needs?

The establishment of collaboration structures to address each facet of the issue of reopening school buildings will result in better, more informed decisions, because the reopening plan will have been made with the benefit of all stakeholders' experiences and expertise. Decisions made jointly are most likely to be supported by the people who will implement them and the people who are impacted by them. Even in the best-case scenario, reopening school buildings will most certainly be messy and fraught with challenges. We need all hands on deck now, while we have the summer months to prepare. Together, as the nation's educators, school and district leaders, and elected school boards, we have the opportunity to create a safe and nurturing future for America's students.

They are counting on all of us.

Related Reading and Additional Resources:

AASA - The School Superintendents' Association (2020). Resolution in support of a safe, healthy, and district-specific reopening process informed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed: <http://aasacentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AASA-Resolution-in-Support-of-a-Safe-Healthy-and-District-Specific-Reopening-Process.pdf>

American Federation of Teachers (2020). A plan to safely reopen America's schools and communities. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed: https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf

Consortium for Educational Change (CEC) Virtual National Labor-Management Collaboration Symposium, June 29th-July 1st, 2020. For more information and to register visit www.cecweb.org.

National Education Association (2020). Collaborating in a crisis: Ensuring educator voice when it matters most. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed: <http://myschoolmyvoice.nea.org/collaborating-for-student-success/get-the-collaborating-in-a-crisis-guidebook/>

NSBA COVID-19 resources <https://www.nsba.org/Resources/coronavirus>



The National Labor-Management Partnership is a coalition that includes AASA - The School Superintendents' Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the Consortium for Educational Change, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.