

As More Schools Resume In-Person Learning, Some Lessons From Districts That Did It First



Students at Corinth Elementary School in Corinth, Miss., use social distancing as they line up after leaving the restroom on their first day back in school in late July.

—Adam Robison/The Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal via AP

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

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It was a joyous back-to-school scene: Boys and girls showed up with freshly pressed clothes, scrubbed faces, and hair bows. They took pictures in front of their new classrooms. Weepy parents said goodbye to their kindergartners for the first time.

The same panorama has greeted the first day of school since time immemorial, but this one, in the Rocklin, Calif., district on Sept. 21, was a bit different: The school year had actually started an entire month ago—online. This was the first day of in-person learning.

“There was really a feeling of hope for so many kids—that things can begin to be on a path or trajectory to some of the things that were taken from them this past spring,” said Superintendent Roger Stock. “We know it won’t be normal for a while, but to give them that sense of resilience and hope is just great to see.”

Rocklin, a 12,000-student district located east of Sacramento, recently moved to a hybrid plan with staggered days of in-person schooling, per California’s tiered health department guidelines for schools. It is one of what is expected to be thousands of U.S. school districts that are moving a step closer to full in-person instruction this month, as school leaders reassess their responses to the coronavirus pandemic.

They join the thousands of schools in states that have already moved to part- or full-time in-person learning.

Even urban districts that have been warier about in-person learning are increasingly beginning that conversation. **Most of the nation’s urban districts began the 2020-21 school year with remote learning**, but some, including the District of Columbia, have unveiled plans to return to at least some grades to in-person classrooms.

And of the 10 largest school districts, six—Miami-Dade, Broward, Orange, and Hillsborough, all in Florida, plus Houston and New York City—are offering, or plan to offer in-person instruction to some or all grades by the end of the month.

The successes of those districts that make the leap to in-person schooling are likely to encourage neighboring ones to follow suit, even as some others—most recently the Boston district—flip back into remote learning following increases in local

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COVID-19 cases.

Interviews with leaders in four school districts, all in different phases of in-person learning, elucidate the successes and challenges district leaders face in returning to brick-and-mortar schooling.

Enforcing mask-wearing? Much less of a concern than many of them originally feared.

Instruction? Still a major challenge, the superintendents said, pointing in particular to the pedagogical burden on teachers who must juggle both in-person and online formats.

They also point to the ways in which “normal” schooling, if a vaccine is developed in coming months, will probably look different from the era before COVID-19.

The Case for In-Person Learning

Despite years and years of slick pitches and tech-industry lobbying on personalization, flipped classrooms, and one-to-one programs, research suggests that in-person schooling **is superior for the great majority of K-12 schoolchildren**, especially those living in poverty.

And a recent ProPublica/New Yorker story **outlined the damage done** to some of the nation’s most underserved students, who have borne the brunt of a lack of **universal broadband access**, smaller doses of synchronous teaching, and according to local news reports, **are more often located** in schools that are still doing full-time remote learning.

The reasons for those patterns are complex. Teachers’ unions in Chicago, New York, and Washington, among others, have been among those quarreling with school leaders about whether—and how—to safely open schools for in-person learning.

But labor is hardly the only factor that’s shaping those decisions. Problems with staffing, **accelerated staffing retirements**, and even concerns about liability insurance have all shaped the conversation about whether to reopen. So has the toxic politicization of the school reopening conversation, a lack of shared state and local protocols for collecting and disseminating data on COVID-19 rates in schools, and an inadequate supply of reliable COVID-19 tests.

And in some states, nearly all schools have already transitioned to in-person learning. Most Mississippi districts are following a hybrid model. In Wyoming, all schools are conducting in-person instruction, with the exception of those on the Wind River Indian Reservation, where residents are still under a stay-at-home health order. And in South Carolina, just 10 percent of districts are still remote-only, and that figure continues to decrease, officials in those states said.

Regardless of local health data or what the evolving research on COVID-19 concludes, superintendents say there’s an initial need to convince parents that in-person schooling can be done safely. Whether schools are actually safe, they noted, is a different issue altogether from whether parents perceive that they are safe.

That means that developing a rock-solid plan for contact tracing, cleaning, and safety protocols, communicating them effectively, and then adhering to them are critical steps preceding the return to in-person schooling, the district leaders said.

“We knew, out of the gate, we had to have defined expectations about where students were sitting, whether it’s a bus or a classroom—we needed seating charts in every classroom in this organization,” said Addison Davis, the superintendent of the 207,000-student Hillsborough County, Fla., district. “That’s going to allow us to immediately determine who’s had direct or indirect contact with someone who’s positive.”

Leaders in the Seguin school district, in Seguin, Texas, can point to a single number encapsulating their commitment to safety: **1.64 million**. That’s the dollar figure of what the 7,200-student district has spent so far on sanitizer, personal protective equipment, and hiring additional hall monitors to record restroom sign-ins and help with contact tracing if a case is detected. **The figure sits just below the district’s daily updated tracker of COVID-19 cases.**

“I want the community to know how much we’ve spent—most of it we’ve had to go into the fund balance—relative to limited support and resources we’re receiving at a state level. It’s important for them to see where we’re at in relation to the number of COVID cases,” said Superintendent Matthew Gutierrez.

Education Week survey data, meanwhile, show that **parents of Black and Hispanic students are consistently less likely** to believe in the safety of in-person schooling. That is probably a function of a lack of trust or racism many of those parents have experienced in their interactions with public schools, as well as the disproportionate impact that the coronavirus has had on those communities. It also raises questions about equity and the role districts play in developing relationships with those communities and convincing parents that their children will be safe.

School systems also have different rules about whether parents are allowed to switch instructional formats mid-year. That’s one reason why some districts, like the Festus R-VI district in southeastern Missouri, have made special efforts to inform parents about the choices.

During the summer, every family in the 3,100-student district had to go over the different learning models with either the director of student services or the district’s assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, Nicki Ruess, before picking

one.

“It was part of our protocols that they actually speak to someone, not just click a box online, so they understood what they were selecting, and what the expectations were,” Ruess said. “It was really time-consuming in the beginning, but it paid dividends in the end because parents were well aware about what decision they were making.”

Unexpected Success, Unexpected Challenge

The districts interviewed by Education Week all said that, while teaching, staffing, and class sizes continue to pose logistical issues, careful planning has made other routines run smoothly.

For one, despite the national political debate over mask-wearing and pragmatic concerns that younger students would struggle to adhere to keeping a mask on, all four of the superintendents said they’ve had few problems getting students and staff to follow the guidelines.

“We really thought we’d have major pushback from staff and kids and parents, and were hesitant to put that in our plan, and people have done what we’ve asked in that area,” said Link Luttrell, the superintendent of the Festus district. “I think the biggest reason that it wasn’t, ... was because I truly feel they wanted the schools open. They wanted to be here, and they did whatever was asked of them to make that happen.”

More challenging, the administrators said, has been meeting all students’ teaching and learning needs. All four districts are continuing to offer full-time remote learning for those parents and students that want it, from about 10 percent of students in Rocklin to up to about half of the students in the Seguin and Hillsborough county districts.

“Our teachers are just resilient. They give 100 percent to everything and rise up to every challenge. I think what we didn’t quite expect is that, for a lot of our teachers who are teaching both face-to-face and virtual learning, the challenge is giving 100 percent to both. That’s hard,” said Gutierrez.

In his district, some teachers are simultaneously teaching students in person and broadcasting lessons. For those who cannot attend—national news reports note that high school attendance is down, with many teenagers working jobs to keep food on the table—teachers are prerecording lessons and drafting asynchronous assignments. All those formats demand a different approach to crafting learning materials.

“There is a certain way you approach teaching and learning remotely versus face to face. You’re using double the amount of strategies, and then you’re going online later to engage with those who weren’t able to go online,” Gutierrez noted. “It’s not enough to upload a recording or your lesson. There may be that need for clarification or to provide that tutoring or intervention.”

Across the districts, some of the most basic teaching skills, like a “check for understanding,” or an exit ticket to determine whether students mastered the day’s content, or classroom participation, must be translated for all learning options.

In its most recently inked memorandum of understanding with its teachers’ union, the Rocklin district added four additional hours each week to give teachers more paid time beyond their normal prep periods to collaborate on teaching methods, Stock said.

Teachers, the district leaders said, are also having to discard or modify some teaching practices, particularly anything that involves group work, due to social-distancing requirements. The pandemic has made it much more difficult to engage students in collaborative projects or even the “think-pair-share” routines common in U.S. schools.

“Never before had students missed five months, and the best way to address it is small group instruction. Small group instruction in a pandemic is challenging; teachers are being very creative in developing ways to do it, but it is not as ideal as we had hoped it would be back before all of this happened,” said Daniela Simic, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Hillsborough County.

Testing remains an area of concern, especially for producing test results that are comparable between students attending in person and those at home. (The Education Department has so far **declined to waive spring testing requirements** in federal law. Many districts use periodic tests every quarter to determine progress towards state standards.)

In general, Ruess of the Festus district said, while there’s a robust marketplace for higher education test providers who can assure security through video monitoring and other tools, there are far fewer such options for K-12 providers.

“The difficulty I’m hearing is that there’s not a lot of them that offer a K-12 type of solution, because of the challenges with confidentiality and recording,” she said.

‘A Little Bit of Normal’

For students themselves, there’s a lot of new adjustments: In some districts, teachers switch among classes, not students, to keep each cohort of students together and minimize interactions. Most secondary schools have one-way hallways, entrances, and exits. Some districts now have temperature checks or thermal scanners. Cafeteria times and recesses are staggered, seats are arranged checkerboard-style, some students eat in their homerooms.

Added together, such changes can feel odd and unfamiliar, but students and staff alike are adjusting. In the first few days of hybrid learning in Rocklin, Stock says he's pleased with what he's seen.

"I saw teachers and students going through the [safety] protocols, but very quickly, and then they were moving into learning," he said. "You could tell teachers knew, for example, that this student needed to sit near the front of room because he was having trouble focusing online. That was comforting as well."

"I was tearing up. Really, honestly," said Luttrell of the Festus district's first few days back. "It was a little bit of normal." Student behavior has improved markedly in the weeks since in-person school resumed, he added: "I think part of it is that kids just want to be in school. They want to have that socialization."

One gauge of success is that parents are beginning to warm up to it more.

In Seguin, which is allowing parents to switch teaching models before its second grading period begins, Gutierrez anticipates that enrollment in the in-person model will grow from half to about 70 percent of students. That's great news from an educational and socialization perspective, but it will also mean that some of the district's social-distancing protocols will become more challenging as classrooms begin to fill up again.

The superintendents also said that the nation's experiment with remote learning will probably have lasting impacts on school operations. The minority of parents and students who found benefits to remote schooling will likely clamor to keep it as an option.

"We will probably always have a fully online format for students, because there are some teachers and parents who have really thrived in it," Stock said. "To not have that in our portfolio of options is probably unthinkable."

Library Director Holly Peele and Librarian and Data Specialist Maya Riser-Kositsky contributed to this article.