



Executive Summary

The Road Back

Restart and Recovery
Plan for Education

New Jersey Department of Education



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted every aspect of our lives. As we look to the future and plan for students to return to schools in-person this fall, we must recognize and prepare for the ways the virus and necessary public health response has changed and will change the way students learn.

This Restart and Recovery Plan provides educators and administrators with the information necessary to ensure that our schools reopen safely and are prepared to accommodate students' unique needs during this unprecedented time.

The Plan presents guidance related to four key subject areas:

1. Conditions for Learning
2. Leadership and Planning
3. Policy and Funding
4. Continuity of Learning

Throughout the document, the term "anticipated minimum standards" is used to refer to items that school districts should incorporate into their reopening plans as definite components related to health, safety, and operations. The term "considerations" is used to refer to components that districts and schools should incorporate into their thinking about reopening, but do not represent necessary components of plans.

Conditions for Learning

Conditions for learning must not only address students' and educators' basic physical safety needs, but also the social and emotional and environmental factors that can impact educators' capacity to teach and students' capacity to learn.

At a minimum, school districts must adopt a policy for screening students and employees for symptoms of COVID-19 and history of exposure and must strive for social distancing within the classroom and on school buses. If schools are not able to maintain this physical distance, additional modifications should be in place, including physical barriers between desks and turning desks to face the same direction. Each school district must also adopt cleaning and disinfecting procedures.

School staff and visitors are required to wear face coverings unless doing so would inhibit the individual's health or the individual is under two years of age. Students are strongly encouraged to wear face coverings and are required to do so when social distancing cannot be maintained, unless doing so would inhibit the student's health. It is also necessary to acknowledge that enforcing the use of face coverings may be impractical for young children or individuals with disabilities.

In addition to these minimum standards, the NJDOE has identified ten Critical Areas of Operation that schools must address in their restart plans:

1. **General Health and Safety Guidelines** – In all stages and phases of pandemic response and recovery, schools must comply with Center for Disease Control (CDC), state, and local guidelines. Schools must also provide reasonable accommodations for staff and students at higher risk for severe illness and promote behaviors that reduce spread, such as social distancing, frequent hand washing and the use of face coverings.

- 2. Classrooms, Testing, and Therapy Rooms** – Schools and districts must allow for social distancing to the maximum extent possible. When social distancing is difficult or impossible, face coverings are required, and face coverings are always required for visitors and staff unless it will inhibit the individual's health. School districts must also minimize use of shared objects, ensure indoor facilities have adequate ventilation, prepare and maintain hand sanitizing stations, and ensure students wash hands frequently.
- 3. Transportation** – School districts should maintain social distancing practices on buses to the maximum extent practicable and adopt best practices for cleaning and disinfecting all vehicles used for transporting students. If maintaining social distancing is not possible, all students who are able must wear face coverings while on busses.
- 4. Student Flow, Entry, Exit, and Common Areas** – School district reopening plans should establish the process and location for student and staff health screenings. This should include providing physical guides, such as tape on floors or sidewalks and signs on walls, to help ensure that staff and students remain at least six feet apart. When it is not possible to maintain physical distancing, schools must require the use of face coverings.
- 5. Screening, PPE, and Response to Students and Staff Presenting Symptoms** – School districts must adopt a policy for safely and respectfully screening students and employees for symptoms of and history of exposure to COVID-19. Students and staff with symptoms related to COVID-19 must be safely and respectfully isolated from others. If a school district becomes aware that an individual who has spent time in a district facility tests positive for COVID-19, district officials must immediately notify local health officials, staff, and families of a confirmed case while maintaining confidentiality.
- 6. Contact Tracing** – Contact tracing is the process used to identify those who have come into contact with people who have tested positive for many contagious diseases, including COVID-19. It is a long-standing practice and is an integral function of local health departments. All school district administrators, school safety specialists, counselors, and any other staff deemed appropriate by the school district, should be provided with information regarding the role of contact tracing in keeping school communities safe from the spread of contagious disease. School districts should collaborate with the local health department and engage their school nurses to develop contact tracing policies and procedures, as well as educate the broader school community on the importance of contact tracing.
- 7. Facilities Cleaning Practices** – School districts must continue to adhere to existing required facilities cleaning practices and procedures, and any new specific requirements of the local health department as they arise. School districts must also develop a schedule for increased routine cleaning and disinfecting, especially of frequently touched surfaces and objects, and sanitize bathrooms daily and between use as much as possible.
- 8. Meals** – If cafeterias or other group dining areas are in use, school districts must stagger eating times to allow for social distancing and disinfecting of the area between groups. Additionally, districts must discontinue family-style, self-service, and buffet-style dining and maintain social distancing. Cafeteria staff must wash their hands immediately after removing gloves and after directly handling used food service items.
- 9. Recess/Physical Education** – School districts must complete an inventory of outdoor spaces and mark off areas to ensure separation between students. Recess must be staggered by groups and staff must disinfect playground equipment and other shared equipment between uses. School districts should also consider closing locker rooms and encouraging students to wear comfortable clothing and safe footwear to school so they can participate in physical education classes without needing to change.
- 10. Extracurricular Activities and Use of Facilities Outside of School Hours** – All extracurricular activities must comply with applicable social distancing requirements and hygiene protocol. External community organizations that use school facilities must follow district guidance on health and safety protocols.

In addition to taking these steps to protect students' and educators' physical health, leaders must also consider the impact of social isolation on both educators and students. Based on input from New Jersey stakeholders and educators from across the country, the NJDOE recommends school district teams include the following elements in their reopening plans:

- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and School Climate and Culture** – Social emotional learning (SEL) will be critical in re-engaging students, supporting adults, rebuilding relationships, and creating a foundation for academic learning. To this end, school districts are encouraged to thoughtfully plan around the well-being of educators so they can support the social and emotional well-being and learning needs of their students, acknowledge and prepare for the potential trauma that staff and students have faced during the COVID-19 school closures, and recognize and empower educators' and staff's strengths.
- **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)** – MTSS is a systematic approach to prevention, intervention, and enrichment in grades PK-12 for academics and behavior that offers educators and families a mechanism to identify individual students who need extra support. In partnership with leaders and educators from districts experienced with implementing MTSS the NJDOE identified universal screening, collaborative problem-solving teams, family engagement, and data-based decision making as critical components for districts moving toward MTSS.
- **Wraparound Supports** – Wraparound services differ from traditional school-based services in their comprehensive approach to addressing the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students with interventions both inside and outside of the school environment. These include mental health support, primary health and dental care, family engagement, expanded before-school and after-school and summer learning time, and mentoring programs.
- **Food Service and Distribution** – School meals are critical to student health and well-being, especially for low-income students, and the NJDOE considers it a moral imperative to ensure the seamless and continuous feeding of New Jersey's approximate 1.4 million students during all phases of school reopening. The Department is working with the Departments of Agriculture and Health to ensure that school district concerns related to food service are addressed as more guidance is made available.
- **Quality Child Care** – Child care will be needed as schools reopen, particularly in instances where modified school schedules may increase the likelihood that families that otherwise would not utilize child care will now require it. The NJDOE encourages schools to involve child care providers in planning meetings, communicate the school's modified schedule to local child care providers, and plan to transport students from school to child care facilities.

Leadership and Planning

Adjusting the school environment to ensure the health and safety of students and staff will require a great deal of planning. School districts should create Restart Committees to coordinate the overall reopening plan. These Committees should include district- and school-level administrators, school board members or charter trustees, local education association representatives, educators, parents, and students.

School districts should also establish school-based Pandemic Response Teams to centralize, expedite, and implement COVID-19-related decision-making. Each school team should have a liaison that reports to district-level administrators to ensure coordinated actions across the district. Pandemic Response Teams should include a cross section of administrators, teachers and staff, and parents and should represent a cross-section of the school community including its gender and racial diversity.

The Restart Committee should work closely with school Pandemic Response Teams, health departments, and others in municipal and county government to develop district plans that address the ten Critical Areas of Operation. The NJDOE also recommends they address the following critical issues:

- **Scheduling** – Districts' reopening plans must account for resuming in-person instruction in some capacity. Scheduling decisions should be informed by careful evaluation of the health and safety standards and the most up to date guidance from the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH), as well the stakeholder input on the needs of all students and the realities of each unique district. School district polices for attendance and instructional time may require modifications for the 2020-2021 school year.
- **Staffing** – Regardless of the environment, school districts should clearly communicate with teachers regarding expectations and support for student learning. School reopening plans and decision-making throughout the school year should consider unique needs of each staff member, such as access to technology, social and emotional health, and child care concerns. Staff roles will also have to expand to accommodate new health and safety regulations. Districts should consider leveraging staff to monitor student movement, hallway traffic, and maintain safety according to guidelines. Instructional and non-instructional staff schedules may also include designated time to support school building logistics required to maintain health and safety requirements.
- **Athletics** – The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) has established a COVID-19 Medical Advisory Task Force (MATF) responsible for providing guidance to allow New Jersey high school student-athletes to return to athletics as soon and as safely as possible. The NJSIAA is also convening a Sports Advisory Task Force that will be comprised of athletic directors from across the State and that will be charged with reviewing State and local health guidelines, as well as NJDOE guidance, regarding the 2020-2021 school year to determine, among other things, the extent to which changes may be needed for each interscholastic sports season.

School districts should strive to share their scheduling plans with staff, families, and students at least four weeks before the start of the school year in order to allow families to plan child care and work arrangements.

Policy and Funding

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a variety of fiscal challenges related to the delivery of instruction and related services to students. Readying facilities, purchasing supplies, and transporting and feeding students will look drastically different in the upcoming school year than in past years. Policy and funding considerations include:

- **Purchasing** – School districts will likely need to purchase items not needed in the past (e.g., personal protective equipment or cleaning supplies) and experience increased demand for previously purchased goods and services. Districts collaborate to create new arrangements that will allow them to purchase items at a lower cost by either purchasing through an established State contract or through a cooperative purchasing consortium.
- **Use of Reserve Accounts, Transfers, and Cashflow** – To the greatest extent possible, districts should consider making expenditures from various accounts or overbudgeted line items to meet unanticipated costs and to manage their cash flow. School districts may be able to use funds on deposit in their emergency reserve accounts to finance unanticipated expenses that arise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A school district would need the Commissioner's approval to make a withdrawal from this account. Additionally, districts should be mindful that certain budget actions require the Commissioner's approval. These requirements are statutory and cannot be waived by the NJDOE, and districts should not presume that such approval will be automatic.
- **Costs and Contracting** – All school districts are strongly encouraged to participate in the federal E-rate program, which provides schools and libraries with funding support for high-speed broadband connectivity and internal connections equipment. The NJDOE also encourages districts to use cooperative contracts available from the State of New Jersey, New Jersey School Boards Association,

County Cooperative Contracts, and County Educational Services Commissions to procure technology and connectivity services.

To ease the burden on schools, the NJDOE plans to leverage existing and pending federal and state legislation, regulations, and guidance to predict the potential impact on districts and provide targeted assistance. Resources that may be available to schools include:

- **Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund** – The federal “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security” (CARES) Act established the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to provide direct money to school districts and provide funding to support areas impacted by COVID-19. Under the law, \$310.4 million has been allocated to New Jersey, the majority of which will in turn be provided to school districts through subgrants.
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency – Public Assistance** – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administers the Public Assistance program, which reimburses 75 percent of eligible expenses that are a direct result of the declared emergency (in this case, the COVID-19 outbreak). Districts can apply for assistance through the website maintained by the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management. While there is currently no deadline, the NJDOE encourages districts to apply as soon as possible.
- **State School Aid** – In the wake of the COVID-19 public health emergency, State revenues have declined precipitously. This revenue loss necessitated modifying the State school aid proposal for the upcoming school year that had been released on February 27, 2020, but the total amount appropriated for K-12 State aid is essentially unchanged from the 2019-2020 school year. While districts should use the most recent State aid figures for planning purposes, that information is not final, but represents a proposal that could be modified by the Legislature when it considers the extended FY20 budget, which must be adopted by July 1, 2020 and the FY21 State budget, which must be adopted by September 30, 2020. The NJDOE will provide more detailed accounting guidance after the appropriations act is adopted.

Continuity of Learning

Ensuring continuity of learning is critically important during this time of great stress for families, educators, and students. The degree to which districts will be able to return students to brick and mortar education remains uncertain. The NJDOE anticipates that many students likely made less than one full year of academic growth during the 2019-2020 school year. The move to a fully virtual learning environment happened quickly and created significant challenges for staff and students, particularly students already considered at-risk prior to the pandemic. Districts should work closely with their stakeholders to ensure decisions are made collaboratively and transparently and prioritize safely returning students who are most in need of in-person instruction. This may include, but is not limited to, students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL), homeless youth, and low-income students.

With these caveats in mind, the NJDOE recommends districts focus on the following areas when crafting their reopening plans to ensure continuity of learning:

- **Ensuring the Delivery of Special Education and Related Services to Students with Disabilities** – Districts must continue to meet their obligations to students with disabilities to the greatest extent possible. Specific strategies and considerations for students with disabilities must be critical points of discussion for every return-to-school scenario. The NJDOE will continue to update school districts and receiving schools with any additional guidance from the United States Department of Education (USDE) on implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

- **Technology and Connectivity** – Each school district should strive to ensure that every student has access to a device and internet connectivity. Districts should prioritize the provision of technology, or, alternatively, in-person instruction, to students that are otherwise without access and should include in their reopening plan the steps taken to address the technology need and how it will be resolved as soon as possible.
- **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments** – In planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment for reopening, districts must focus on building staff capacity to deliver highly effective instruction in hybrid environments as well as preparing them to address any learning gaps that might prevent students from meeting grade-level New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLs). The NJDOE encourages districts to develop plans that are innovative, cultivate a clear sense of shared purpose and goals, encourage collaboration among educators, and foster an effective partnership approach with students' family members and caregivers.
- **Professional Learning** – It is imperative that districts provide professional learning that will better equip leaders, staff, substitutes, students, and parents/caregivers to adapt to altered educational environments and experiences. Among the most critical focus areas are training to address the learning loss for the most vulnerable populations (students with disabilities, English language learners, students without proper technology or internet access, etc.), and preparing and supporting educators in meeting the social emotional, health, and academic needs of all students.
- **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** – CTE programs and the postsecondary credentials and opportunities they offer provide serve as key momentum points for individuals on a path to economic opportunity, especially those from underserved communities. Maintaining these opportunities is vital for students, families, communities, and the State. The Office of Career Readiness has established guiding principles to help administrators and educators make informed decisions about how, when, and to what extent career and technical education can be safely offered.

Mapping the Road Back for education in New Jersey will require a collaborative, comprehensive, and careful approach to reopening schools as well as school district flexibility to pivot should health conditions change. Still, New Jersey residents, students, and educators are resilient and with the guidance offered in this document, districts will be able to successfully develop plans that allow schools to reopen in a way that protects students' and educators' physical health while providing high-quality education.

