



Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF
THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

PEL-095
JULY 1, 2020

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Successfully Restarting Schools in the Face of COVID-19: A Framework

Within a matter of weeks this spring, we saw virtually every school building in the country abruptly close, sending students home with worksheets and/or laptops and leaving district staff scrambling to figure out how to provide not only instruction but meals and other critical supports to students and their families. This sudden shuttering of schools has given parents and our communities a deep appreciation for the important and myriad roles that schools play. In addition to its mission to educate our nation's students, public schools are critical to the functioning of our communities and to the health of our nation's economy.

The normal process of decision-making at school system makes planning for the reopening of schools extremely challenging. Decision-making at school systems is typically very centralized and top-down, with the superintendent in the spotlight/hot seat on major decisions and initiatives. School systems generally take a cautious "cover all the bases" approach to any new endeavor. New efforts big and small – whether it is a change to curriculum, a new initiative, or a change in schedule – are researched and carefully crafted with detailed and comprehensive specifications. New efforts are often piloted or phased in over time so issues can be worked out prior to full-scale rollout. The reasons are understandable: school districts are highly complex organizations subject to federal, state, and local regulation; they utilize public funds; many operate under collective bargaining agreements; they have multiple stakeholders with often-conflicting interests; and they are charged with the tremendous responsibility of educating and meeting the myriad needs of our nation's youth.

Because of the complexities surrounding restarting schools and the compressed timeframe, a centralized, top-down approach is simply not feasible; too much work has to be done in too little time, so leadership must be distributed. Nor is the "cover all the bases approach" realistic. School districts need to be innovative and entrepreneurial and need to act quickly. Once plans are put in place this fall, districts need to adopt an "Agile" approach typical of software development; they will need to work in small groups, be flexible and creative, focus on continuous improvement cycles, collect feedback, iterate, and improve as they go. Collaborating and sharing ideas among districts to draw on collective intelligence will also be tremendously beneficial as districts navigate these unprecedented times.

Professor John J-H Kim and Kathleen Choi prepared this note as the basis for class discussion. John J-H Kim is a Senior Lecturer in General Management at the Harvard Business School and Co-Chair of the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) and Kathleen Choi is the Managing Editor of the District Management Journal (DMJ), a publication of District Management Group (DMG) where John J-H Kim is the founder and CEO.

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A Framework for Planning for the Reopening (see Exhibit 1)

The *right* plan for each district will vary based on differing contexts. But *how* a district goes about constructing a plan is important and can make a difference in the quality of the plans produced.

To help districts in this work, we have put forth a framework to help districts disrupt their traditional patterns of problem solving and decision making. Because of the short time frame and the complexity of the work, we recommend that districts divide the work among four functional teams and then have a steering committee, led by the district superintendent, to focus on providing coherence and address issues on equity. Each of the groups will need to place an emphasis on innovation and creativity as they look to develop detailed proposals for the variety of scenarios that may arise, which might include fully remote learning, a hybrid model, modified on-campus schooling, as well as the possibility of having to pivot between these models due to rolling closures.

We recommend forming the four working groups listed below. Typically, districts and schools put together hierarchical teams, deferring to titles and seniority; districts and schools must put aside hierarchical and bureaucratic structures and create teams focused on expertise, innovation, and action. These working groups should be comprised of staff closest to the work who have intimate knowledge of all the complexity and details of the work; these are the people who are best positioned to develop specific plans and help develop creative solutions. Ideally, you want to tap those people you sense may have long been harboring ideas they have wanted to try; oddly, this period is an opportunity to break free of some of the bureaucratic and hierarchical constraints and be creative and try new approaches. Each group should be made up of approximately five to ten individuals (depending on the size of the district), enough to generate creative ideas but not so many as to prevent quick action.

Instructional Core/Social Emotional Learning working group

This group is charged with addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of all students under all scenarios. The scope includes defining the instructional experience for students in remote, blended, and modified in-person models —which may include significant innovation in how, when, and by whom instruction is provided and how students are grouped; providing development for teachers and staff around the methods of instruction; determining schedules that best meet instructional needs; and addressing student trauma, mental health and social-emotional issues.

Operations working group

This group is charged with developing scheduling for various scenarios; developing plans for facility usage, facility maintenance and hygiene; planning details around food service, transportation, cleaning requirements; addressing academic technology needs, and much more.

Stakeholder Engagement/Communications working group

This group must address everything from ensuring the district has contact information for all students to engaging stakeholders and building support. The scope of work includes which channels of communication to use and when; developing a plan for drafting communications as well as pre-drafting some messaging in advance; determining which stakeholders should be engaged in providing input on the plans, which can help build support, and which could derail your plans.

Resources working group

This group is charged with developing plans for multiple financial scenarios and addressing the utilization of all resources – including funding, staff time, instruction time, facilities, etc. This group’s charge includes thinking creatively about scheduling and maximizing the use of facilities; making the most of student, teacher, and staff time which might include ideas about grouping students based on learning needs; assessing which programs are most effective and then determining which should be expanded and which might be sunsetted.

Since school plans need to be developed very quickly, these teams should meet once a week to generate ideas and alternatives to clear challenges that they face. The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible, even ones that may seem logistically very complex. For example, should school assignment be changed in order to significantly reduce the number of students that need to be transported? Should the district set up a district-wide virtual academy (i.e. remote learning) that is taught by teachers who are not able to return physically to school?

Then, representatives or leaders from each of the working groups should meet later in the week with the steering committee to share the new ideas generated. The steering committee along with the representatives from each of the groups then can explore the ideas generated, discuss the feasibility based on their different perspectives, and can assess these proposals based on coherence and equity concerns. For example, if school assignments were changed in order to minimize bus transportation of students, what affect would this have on staffing and long-held priorities around providing more equitable opportunities to the community? These weekly meetings with the steering committee can help to guide and narrow the ideas being generated by the working groups.

Steering Committee

Typically, the superintendent and central office staff get deeply involved in all aspects of the work, making it difficult to maintain the perspective and focus that senior leadership needs. With our framework, the working groups are deeply immersed in the details, freeing the steering committee, led by the superintendent, to focus on ensuring coherence of the entire plan and addressing equity issues, all while keeping public health concerns at the forefront. When selecting the members of the steering committee, thought should be given to who has the clout, skills, and ability to build support for your plan. In addition to making sure the reopening plan is viable, the steering committee should also keep an eye on the district’s long-term strategic goals.

The steering committee is the body charged with making the tough decision that require tradeoffs affecting the entire district. For example, if there is not enough space to accommodate all students at the same time in school facilities, how should the district allocate this precious and constrained resource? Should the district prioritize bringing back students who are most vulnerable and have special needs? Should the district try to rotate who gets to come to school in a schedule that splits the day into am/pm or alternating days? Are the plans being sensitive to families that may not be able to afford to have one parent or guardian at home? What about students who may not have the right set of online access and resources at home? The Steering committee should be charged with managing these tradeoffs and for ensuring that long term priorities and issues of social and racial justice are being addressed.

Because of the difficult decisions and tradeoffs that likely lie ahead, we recommend that the steering committee begin their work by defining their guiding principles. The guiding principles must truly guide decision making. Some examples include: “Our goal is to bring everyone back to school in person

as much as possible;” “Our guiding principle will be to ensure that we prioritize health safety;” “We will focus on prioritizing our youngest students and students who have special needs or may have home situations that do not allow for productive learning.” These have very different implications for what considerations will take priority and what kinds of decisions will emerge. These guiding principles need to be shared early and often with the broader community so that everyone has a clear vision for what the objectives are.

The Power of Collaboration

In addition to adopting this structure for the work, there is great benefit to be had from coordinating with peers from other districts both at the working group level and the steering committee level, particularly those in the same geographic area. Coordinating with other districts provides the opportunity to tap the collective intelligence and wisdom. Collaborating with peers can bring energy and provide support to staff and helps ensure that the best ideas are surfaced. In addition, working together can provide the opportunity to pool resources to access experts. Districts will likely want to access expert advice on health policy, communications, budgeting, scheduling, and operations as they tackle the complex issues involved in the restarting school.

Finally, collaborating – particularly with those in your geographic area – helps to vet and validate the approaches, which can be particularly helpful in navigating a polarized and politicized environment. In our work supporting districts on reopening plans, we are organizing districts into cohorts by state. Sharing of access to resources and cross-fertilization of ideas is leading to stronger, better formulated plans.

Moving Forward

As the start of school approaches, districts will need to put their plans in place amidst the continuing surge in cases around the country and the increasingly politicized environment where some policy makers and parents would like schools to re-open even if on a modified basis while a large number of teachers and staff as well as parents would like schools to remain virtual given the potential health crisis.

Schools will need to identify and determine ways in which they can monitor and adapt their plans. For those planning to open on a modified basis, a top question on district leaders’ minds are related to the number of students that will actually enroll and attend schools. Will the plans be sufficiently robust and comprehensive enough to bring back a large number of students and staff? Will they have sufficient staff to teach students who return as well as take care of those who remain remote? How will the schools monitor the learning that is taking place in this new environment and make adjustments appropriately?

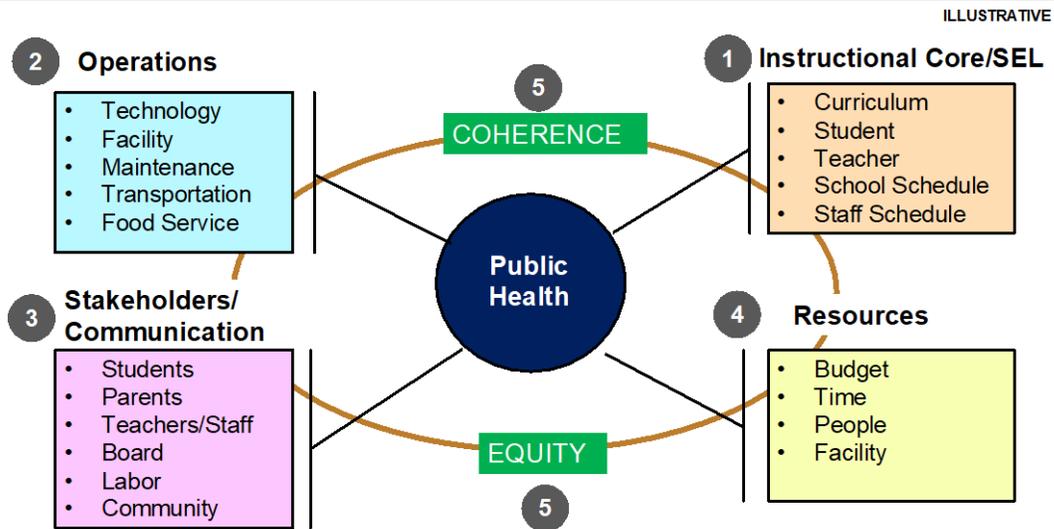
The other factor looming large in district leaders’ minds is under what circumstances should schools close? Most states have established protocols in the event of a confirmed case of Covid-19 resulting in closures for a period of time and requiring thorough cleaning. However, under what circumstances should schools move students to remote learning? Being prepared to pivot back and forth among different ways to teach will rely on the planning that has been done heretofore.

Now, districts are focused on determining how they will approach the restart of school in the fall. But once school – whether it is in-person or remote – begins, another phase of work will commence. The working groups and steering committee will need to monitor the success of the programs implemented, and then will have to take an agile approach as they focus on a continuous improvement cycles, collecting feedback, iterating, and improving as they go. Should schools need to pivot from one mode of instruction to another due to rolling closures, it is the working groups and the steering committee who can draw upon the plans created over the summer to help pivot and to modify, iterate, and effect improvements as the year goes on.

We encourage district leaders to put aside their typical approaches to problem solving and decision making and instead to embrace innovation and an Agile approach to think creatively, try new ideas, new technologies, and new methodologies, and iterate, measure, and modify. It may feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar to depart from the traditional way of doing things, but these are unprecedented times demanding creative, innovative approaches.

Exhibit 1 A Framework for Restarting Schools

Framework for Restarting Schools Fall 2020



Source: Developed by Professor John J-H Kim