

REOPENING STRONGER

Educational Equity Priorities for Fall 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the lives of students, families, and educators across our state and country. As New York prepares for the next academic year and beyond, the state has a unique opportunity to prioritize educational equity in school reopening planning. To do this, state and local leaders must also address the persistent historical inequities in our education system which have been exacerbated by school closures caused by coronavirus.

Teachers, school counselors, administrators, and other educators and school professionals have made extraordinary efforts since the earliest days of the pandemic. Nevertheless, opportunity gaps are getting larger and larger. Recent research projects that as a result of school closures, students may lose nearly one-third of last year’s learning gains in reading and at least two thirds of learning gains in math. Many students will return to school one full school year behind.¹ An analysis from McKinsey & Company finds that the worst impact will be felt by the groups of students who experienced extreme inequities before the pandemic.¹ Significant learning loss is therefore especially threatening to students of color, those in low-income households, students with disabilities,

Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners,² and those experiencing homelessness.

Alongside the coronavirus, the nation is increasingly grappling with what some have called the “second pandemic”: systemic racism. The current momentum and movement around racial equity can be a bellwether for all facets of life, and especially in education. It is a reminder that when schools reopen this fall, New York and the nation only have two choices: to perpetuate the educational inequities that are historically entrenched in our education system, or to take action to address them.

As schools prepare to reopen, New York State’s education system must meet the challenge of supporting all students and their diverse sets of needs. To reverse the learning loss and widening disparities accelerated by the pandemic, school reopening should include a clear and enriching vision for learning that centers on individual student success; elevates the urgency of academic support for all students; and prioritizes the well-being of students, teachers, and families in the context of diverse and inclusive school cultures.

THE NEW YORK EQUITY COALITION



Just as state and local leaders are focused on the *health and safety* components of successful school reopening, we urge that educational equity explicitly drive *academic* reopening considerations. **To achieve**

this goal, this policy brief includes recommendations for specific state guidelines and for what the state should require school district reopening plans to include in eight priority areas:

- 1 **Adopt school schedules that provide safe in-person instruction to the maximum number of students possible;**
- 2 **Close learning gaps and ensure high expectations for all students;**
- 3 **Re-engage students who are at greatest risk of dropping out;**
- 4 **Help high school seniors get and stay on track;**
- 5 **Adopt anti-racist policies and practices;**
- 6 **Improve engagement and communication with parents and families;**
- 7 **Prepare for distance/blended learning and possible future school closures; and**
- 8 **Ensure transparency.**

1 **Adopt school schedules that provide safe in-person instruction to the maximum number of students possible.**



If schools are required to follow new social distancing requirements this fall as expected, we recommend that school schedules be required to promote educational equity and maximize instructional time while following health and safety requirements. State guidelines and school district reopening plans should address:

- **Providing continuity and consistency for students and addressing the child care realities facing parents.** School district reopening plans should describe how schools will—to the extent allowed by health officials—if possible avoid schedules that have students attending school on alternating days

or weeks, which can be disruptive for student learning and for families. For example, one equity-driven approach would have all students attend schools daily—with some attending traditional classes in the morning and others in the afternoon, if permitted by health officials—and supplement these classes with coordinated, enriching programming by after-school providers, libraries, museums, and other community-based organizations so that every student receives as close as possible to a full day of programming each school day.

- **Supporting students in all grade spans.** As schools reopen around the world, countries are taking different approaches to which groups of students they bring back first—or at all—for in-person instruction.³ While there are important reasons to ensure that elementary school students are in school buildings each day—including the science of how children learn to read as well as the child care needs of parents—the in-person learning needs of older students must simultaneously be addressed in school district reopening plans. For example, state guidance should require that school districts describe how high school juniors and seniors preparing to graduate will receive intensive and consistent in-person academic and non-academic support, including postsecondary transition planning for college and careers.
- **Describing how students will fully participate in meaningful instruction when they are not able to attend school in-person.** Specific recommendations are described in greater detail in Recommendation 7.

2

Close learning gaps and ensure high expectations for all students.

 We recommend that all school districts be required to address two linked realities as schools reopen: how they will close the learning gaps that have grown even larger during school closures, and how they will ensure that all students—including the most vulnerable—are on track to meet state standards. State guidelines and school district reopening plans should address:

- **Meeting the individual needs of every student.** School district plans should describe how the school will establish an understanding of where each student is starting the year academically and socio-emotionally. To support schools, the state should make performance tasks with common rubrics and other diagnostic assessments available to all districts to assess students' academic and non-academic needs and to promote consistent high expectations for all students. School districts should be expected to describe how they will use the results of the diagnostic assessments to create a comprehensive instructional plan based on the needs of their students.

- **Providing extended learning time and “wraparound” services.** All school district plans should describe how they will use data on students’ individual instructional needs to develop instructional plans to provide extended learning time and wraparound services—for example, breakfast programming, group counseling, and after-school enrichment to intensify academic and non-academic support—prioritizing students who have fallen behind and students who have been historically underserved in our education system. School districts should be encouraged to leverage partnerships with community-based organizations that provide these services and can draw on a wider range of state, federal, and private funding.
- **Ensuring access to strong teachers.** State guidelines should encourage school districts to prioritize looping of the strongest teachers, flexible scheduling, and co-teaching to accelerate student and teacher re-acclimation. State guidelines should also encourage shared teaching responsibilities across pedagogical staff, targeted small group learning, and using split schedules to lessen teaching workloads and combat educator fatigue. In addition, the state should support all school districts in providing all staff with training in trauma-informed pedagogy to promote confidence and adequate preparation for the classroom. School district reopening plans should be expected to address how schools will ensure that the students with the greatest needs have access to strong teachers.

3

Re-engage students who are at greatest risk of dropping out.



We recommend that state guidelines and school district reopening plans include requirements for identifying and supporting students who were not able to successfully engage in remote or distance learning during school closures or who—with financial insecurity looming due to the economic impact of the pandemic—are working to help support their families.

School districts should be expected to describe how they will direct specific wraparound services to students who have been employed throughout the pandemic to support their return to daily coursework, avoid significant financial impact on their households, and mitigate any risk of drop out.

In addition, the state should provide tools for school districts to use “on track to graduation” data for students in grades 9-11 as an early warning indicator to prevent students from dropping out.

4

Help high school seniors get and stay on track.



Students who will begin 12th grade this fall are at particular risk due to potential gaps in learning and postsecondary preparation. We recommend that state guidelines set clear expectations for how school districts should meet the unique needs of high school seniors during the pandemic.

School district reopening plans should be expected to describe how schools will help all students develop individual transition plans and complete college financial aid applications.

In addition, the state should commit to publicly release annual “to and through” data on the postsecondary pathways of high school seniors, including college persistence and completion, in order to determine how this year’s graduates are faring compared to prior cohorts, to identify additional interventions for students still in high school, and to provide more support at the college level if needed.

5

Adopt anti-racist policies and practices.



It is not possible to achieve an equitable reopening without addressing some of the key underlying inequities in New York State’s education system. We recommend that state guidelines and school district reopening plans incorporate:

- **Implementing culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum and school practices.** School district reopening plans should be expected to address how schools will adopt inclusive and anti-racist curricula and learning materials, provide related professional development to teachers, and empower the voices of students. State guidelines for school district reopening plans should reflect and be consistent with the New York State Education Department’s “Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework.”⁴
- **Supporting educators of color and preparing them to enter the classroom.** While New York State’s student population has become increasingly diverse, the diversity of the teaching force has remained constant. In the 2018-19 school year, more than 220,000 students of color attended schools with no teachers of the same race or ethnicity, and nearly 350,000 White students attended schools with no teachers of color.⁵ Teachers of color also disproportionately teach in the most challenging classrooms and in the most challenging schools.⁶ School district reopening plans should

be expected to describe how all teachers will have opportunities for professional development, mentorship, and mental health resources to combat fatigue and toxic stress, and how schools will specifically establish and promote school cultures that reflect diversity, equity, and inclusivity—including through affinity groups for teachers of color.

- **Improving equitable access to advanced coursework.** In 2018-19, high school students across the state who were not low-income and White students were almost twice as likely to be enrolled in a wide range of advanced courses than their low-income and Black and Latinx peers.⁷ As schools prepare to reopen, all school districts should be expected to describe their plan for how students will be assigned to participate in honors, accelerated, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment courses in middle and high schools, and in gifted and talented programs in elementary schools. Consistent with the New York State Education Department’s “Equitable Course Access Guidance,” reopening plans should describe how the district is eliminating rigid tracking and an overreliance on teacher recommendations for course access decisions.⁸ School district reopening plans should also be expected to address the additional supports that will be provided to students so that they can succeed in advanced courses, how the district will engage students and families early with information about the benefits of enrolling in advanced courses, and how they will make course information available in the multiple home languages of their school community.
- **Reducing over-reliance on suspensions as a form of student discipline.** Students have experienced a significant amount of instructional loss and, in many cases, trauma as a result of pandemic-related school closures. All school district reopening plans should be expected to describe how schools will replace suspensions with supports as a strategy for school discipline. The state should assist school districts to prioritize restorative training in trauma-informed de-escalation and implicit bias for all school safety agents and school staff. School district reopening plans should describe how the district will leverage the expertise of school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and community-based organizations to assess student well-being and combat toxic stress. In addition, school districts should be expected to align disciplinary actions to research-based principles that are restorative, culturally affirming, culturally responsive, and connected to the values of families and communities.
- **Allocating resources to schools with a focus on student need.** Building on New York State’s school budget transparency law, school districts with multiple schools should be expected to describe how they will distribute available funding based on student need. School districts should prioritize funding for schools that serve students with the greatest needs and protect them from budget cuts to the greatest extent possible. State guidelines should include requirements for how parent and community input must be included throughout the budget process and school districts should be required to describe how they will meaningfully incorporate the views of parents from historically underserved groups.

6

Improve engagement and communication with parents and families.



Families are an essential partner in achieving positive outcomes for students. We recommend that state guidelines and school district reopening plans should describe how school districts will engage parents who are representative of the student population when creating school reopening policies. School district plans should also be expected to indicate how all families will receive timely communications in their preferred language. Information regarding plans, initiatives, and meetings should be provided in multiple ways—such as email, texts, radio, and/or by mail—to support those that do not have regular internet access. All school districts should also have a public and transparent plan to welcome new students and families.

7

Prepare for distance/blended learning and possible future school closures.



Drawing on what the state and school districts learned from this spring's school closures, we recommend that state guidelines and school district reopening plans incorporate clear expectations for how students will be supported when they cannot receive daily in-person instruction. This could be necessary for the fall if schools reopen using blended or distance learning schedules, as well as during any future pandemic-related school closures. State guidelines and school district reopening plans should address:

- **Providing instruction and ensuring student engagement.** State guidelines should include specific minimum hour requirements for live instruction if classes are conducted remotely or schools are closed, along with requirements for virtual office hours with teachers and school counselors. In addition, state guidelines should require, and school district reopening plans should be expected to describe, an “every student, every day” approach to engagement that leverages a wide range of school personnel—not only teachers—to ensure that all families interact daily with their child’s school. All plans should address language access for families whose home language is not English.
- **Addressing families’ child care needs.** School district reopening plans should be expected to include how the child care needs of families will be met—in partnership with high-quality and linguistically diverse child care providers in the community—if blended or distance learning is included in the school district’s schedule and during any future school closures.

- **Expanding technology access.** School districts should be expected to describe how they will assess the technology needs of all students and teachers and ensure that all families and teachers have access to the technology required to continue education remotely, including a tablet or other device, internet access, and linguistically responsive technical support.
- **Supporting students with unique learning differences, disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness.** School district reopening plans should be expected to address how schools will collect and file guardian consent for in-home or off-site related services, assistive technologies, or devices, and how they will ensure that families have regular and consistent contact with staff. School districts should have protocols in place to continue compliance with current individualized educational plans as well as protocols for new evaluations. School districts should be required to commit to transparency to provide disaggregated data on new evaluations for special education services.
- **Providing high-quality professional development for all educators.** State guidelines should describe how educators need to be prepared and supported for blended or distance learning. School district reopening plans should be expected to address how the district will provide culturally responsive and sustaining professional development during the summer months and throughout the fall, training in teaching strategies and relevant software for blended or distance learning, and the use of attendance data and online tracking systems.

8 Ensure transparency.



School district reopening plans are vital public records. We recommend that state guidelines require that these plans be posted on school district websites and include a commitment that the state will immediately post all submitted plans on a publicly accessible state website.

It is time to embrace a new equity-driven paradigm for public education. The past few months are testament to the strength of New York State’s leadership, our educators, and our students and families. At the same time, the crisis’s ongoing impact on education is a reminder of longstanding policies and approaches to teaching and learning that represent barriers to students, educators, and communities’ progress. Reopening is an opportunity to focus on closing opportunity gaps and ensuring that New York State is not only better prepared for the next pandemic but—even more importantly—for our shared educational, economic, and civic future. ■

ENDNOTES

¹ Emma Dorn, et al., “COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime,” (New York, NY: McKinsey & Company, 2020). Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>.

² English learners are referred to as Multilingual Learners/English Language Learners in this document consistent with accepted New York State Education Department terminology.

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. See: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

⁴ New York State Education Department. See: <http://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework>.

⁵ Unpublished data analysis conducted by The Education Trust–New York.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The New York Equity Coalition. See: <https://equityinedny.edtrust.org/within-our-reach-2>.

⁸ New York State Education Department. See: <http://www.nysed.gov/memo/essa/equitable-course-access-guidance>.

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