

# Choosing the Best ‘Road Back’ for Our Children

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## The Second in a Series of Reports on Education during the Pandemic

- An advocacy agenda to help schools provide education during the pandemic
- The challenges they face in developing school reopening plans
- A sampling of strategies developed by local school districts as they plan to restart the education process for 2020-2021



New Jersey School Boards Association

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August 31, 2020

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The Second in a Series of Reports  
on Education during the Pandemic

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The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of the state's local boards of education and includes the majority of New Jersey's charter schools as associate members. NJSBA provides training, advocacy and support to advance public education and promote the achievement of all students through effective governance.

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**The New Jersey School Boards Association thanks the local school board members, superintendents and school business administrators who contributed their expertise through interviews for this report and who responded to our surveys on school reopening plans.**

This report includes information obtained from interviews, surveys and published reports in July and August 2020. It reflects the status of various school district reopening plans on the dates that the information was collected. Recent developments may have resulted in changes to district plans.

August 31, 2020

Dear NJSBA Member,

For local school districts, it has been a daunting project: *Identifying the right combination of in-person instruction and virtual learning, balanced with safeguards for the health of students, staff and families.*

Today, as communities finalize school reopening plans for 2020-2021—amid some strife and uncertainty—the New Jersey School Boards Association offers a special report, “Choosing the Best ‘Road Back’ for Our Children.” This is the second in a series of special reports on education during the pandemic. It presents an Advocacy Agenda calling for critical state and federal support for public education during the pandemic, and it describes the obstacles and challenges school districts have faced in developing reopening plans and many of the strategies they have implemented.

Information for our latest report comes from a variety of sources:

- Surveys issued to school board members, superintendents and school business administrators on scheduling, instruction, staffing and transportation and funding and safety protocols. The subject of a third survey, the digital divide, will be the focus of an upcoming report.
- Interviews with local school officials, who shared the critical on-the-ground perspective of how their districts plan to meet many challenges, as well as concerns that remain unanswered.
- Published reports about school reopening plans in New Jersey and nearby states, as well as the experience of other countries in restarting the education process.

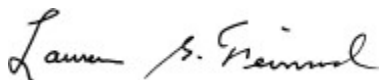
**Findings** Based on our research, NJSBA has found the following:

- In the face of ever-changing, inconsistent and, often, inadequate state and federal guidance, school districts have moved forward with reopening plans designed to meet the needs of their students, but these efforts have come at a financial cost that could have negative consequences in other areas.
- Additional state and federal support is necessary for the purchase of personal protective equipment, educational technology, and frequent sanitizing of facilities, as well as other expenditures to enable social distancing.
- New Jersey’s school districts continue to need strong, universal health and safety protocols from the New Jersey Department of Health to assure students, parents and staff of the safety of in-person instruction.

COVID-19 has altered the lives of our students and their families, as well as the governance of public education. Since the spring, NJSBA has committed its resources to helping local boards of education meet the challenges of the pandemic through training, advocacy and direct services.

Going forward, we sincerely believe that the information contained in this series of special reports will prove valuable to our members and will help inform public policy on education during the pandemic and beyond.

Sincerely,



Lawrence S. Feinsod,  
Ed.D. Executive Director

## I. An Advocacy Agenda for Public Education during the Pandemic

Strengthening school districts' ability to provide educational programs for all students safely and effectively during the pandemic will require more robust involvement by the state and federal government. This includes financial support for pandemic-related expenditures including increased transportation costs, statutory and regulatory flexibility, assistance in securing personal protective equipment (PPE) and educational technology, and other strategies.

NJSBA continues to advocate for greater state and federal funding, changes in law and regulation, and other support that would enable local school districts to serve the needs of their students during 2020-2021. The Association urges support for initiatives cited below.

### Federal and State Funding

In a July survey issued by NJSBA, approximately 62% of superintendents and school business administrators indicated that federal CARES Act funding was not sufficient to cover their districts' needs in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, an [analysis](#) released earlier this year by the national organizations representing superintendents and school business administrators estimated the cost of implementing health and safety protocols. The study found that school districts nationwide can expect to spend approximately \$490 per student to cover costs of PPE, sanitizing supplies, and additional custodial staff and nurses.

It is imperative that the state and federal government provide funding to cover costs associated with the purchase of personal protective equipment, technological devices, transportation, and cleaning/disinfecting supplies that were not built into districts' 2020-2021 budgets.

The Association appreciates Governor Murphy's plan, announced August 26, to direct \$100 million of New Jersey's coronavirus relief fund to help boards of education meet health standards and other expenditures involved in reopening schools. Clearly, the administration has heard the concerns expressed by NJSBA and other educational organizations.

However, Congress and the federal government need to partner with the state and school districts in providing additional resources to deliver education safely and effectively during this public health emergency.

***It is imperative that the state and federal government provide funding to cover necessary costs not built into 2020-2021 school budgets.***

Working through the National School Boards Association, NJSBA has opposed a U.S. Department of Education interpretation of the CARES Act, which would have directed a disproportionate share of coronavirus relief funding to non-public schools. The USDOE directive contradicted the intention of Congress when it passed the CARES Act. On August 21, a U.S. District Court judge issued a temporary injunction blocking the USDOE action.

NJSBA has also advocated for additional federal support, such as the \$500 billion State and Municipal Assistance for Response and Transition ([SMART](#)) Act, which would help states maintain critical services, including educational services, and avoid mass layoffs.

### Securing PPE and Technology

A statewide mechanism to facilitate school district purchasing of medical supplies and technological devices is critical to restarting the educational process in 2020-2021.

On August 27, the Assembly approved NJSBA-supported legislation that would require the state to award one or more contracts to enable for the purchase of pandemic-related goods and services, including medical supplies and devices, by school districts statewide. The bill, A-4461 now moves to the Senate, where complementary legislation, S-2698, is under consideration in the Budget and Appropriations Committee.

Under the proposal, the state may award contracts to more than one bidder to fill the necessary demand among school districts. The commissioner of education would coordinate the purchase of goods and services by districts.

### Financial Flexibility

Social distancing, building alterations, screening protocols, and the expanded use of virtual instruction—whether as part of a hybrid or an all-remote program—are pressures school districts face today. But, as recently as seven months ago, when school districts were developing their 2020-2021 budgets, these factors were not present.

In addition to state and federal support, easing restrictions on financial operations would help school districts meet challenges inherent in providing educational programs during the pandemic. Toward this goal, NJSBA calls on the Legislature to approve proposals, that would provide needed flexibility.

***Easing some restrictions on financial operations would help school districts during the pandemic.***

Reserve/Emergency Accounts The state’s Road Back report addresses the use of reserve accounts as follows:

“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. Similarly, districts may use the maintenance reserve for required maintenance pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-14.2, freeing other funds to be used to meet other needs. As districts’ budgetary needs and priorities shift, they may need to reallocate planned expenditures across different line item appropriations.” (Pages 64-65)

Senate Bill 2507, now in position for a floor vote, and its counterpart, Assembly Bill 4178, would provide flexibility in this area. The proposal would authorize school districts to use capital reserve funds and the emergency reserve account to support the general fund when schools are closed for at least three consecutive days “due to a declared public health emergency...” It would also allow school districts to withdraw funds from these accounts for non-pandemic-related purposes to address reductions in proposed state aid for the 2020-2021 school year.

Surplus/Line Item Transfers Assembly Bill 4310, now in position for a floor vote, and its counterpart, Senate Bill 2691, would allow a school district to maintain a surplus of 4% during 2020-2021. Under current law, a school district, other than a county vocational school district, may only maintain a surplus of 2%. The bill also provides that, for 2020-2021, the transfer of surplus funds between line items and program categories would not require the approval of the Commissioner of Education.

### **Liability Protection**

As referenced in a [recent report](#) by NJSBA's Legal & Labor Relations Services Department, local boards of education need safeguards in addition to those currently provided through the Tort Claims Liability Act. These protections should apply to situations in which the school district could potentially face liability issues while adhering to recommended health and safety precautions. Recently introduced legislation addresses the issue.

Assembly Bill 4440 and Senate Bill 2634, assigned to the Judiciary Committees of their respective houses, would establish general immunity for public entities, including K-12 schools and their employees, against actions related to a person's exposure to the coronavirus or COVID-19. "The immunity would be based on good faith reasonable compliance with...applicable health and safety measures promulgated by state and federal agencies," reads the bill statement.

***Local school boards need safeguards in addition to those currently provided through the Tort Claims Liability Act.***

Another measure, Assembly Bill 4426, would grant immunity specifically to school districts, non-public schools and their employees. The bill also makes immunity contingent upon a school district acting in good faith and complying with, or exceeding, all applicable public health and safety measures.

### **Payment for Services Rendered**

NJSBA advocates relief from requirements under recent legislation, A-3904 (P.L. 2020, c.27). Under the law, district employees and contracted service providers, such as private transportation companies, must be paid when services are not rendered due to a change to all-virtual instruction during a declared public health emergency. The Association has been communicating with legislative staff to secure amendments to the statute.

### **Instructional-Day Minimum**

New Jersey statute requires public school districts to provide a minimum of 180 days of instruction as a condition for receiving state aid. Legislation enacted in April (P.L. 2020, c.27) allowed districts, all of which at the time were required to suspend in-person instruction due to the gubernatorial-declared health emergency, to apply virtual or remote learning toward the 180-day minimum.

The state's Road Back plan, issued in June, states the following, "Virtual learning will continue to be guided by P.L. 2020, c.27 and the district's updated emergency closure school



preparedness plan *if schools are required to deliver instruction through a fully virtual environment* during limited periods throughout the school year due to a local or statewide public health emergency.” [Emphasis added]

Executive Order 175, issued August 13, permits, but does not require, schools to reopen on an all-virtual basis upon certain conditions. Since then, local school district officials have sought further clarification concerning the instructional-day minimum. While the largest share of reopening plans submitted to the Department of Education involve hybrid (in-person/virtual) learning platforms, a significant number would begin the new school year on an all-virtual basis.

Senate Bill 2724, in position for a floor vote, and its counterpart, Assembly Bill 4461, would provide clarity by explicitly authorizing school districts to continue to use virtual or remote learning, in whole or part, to meet the 180-day requirement.

### NJQSAC Review Adjustment

NJSBA’s report, “Searching for a ‘New Normal’ in New Jersey’s Public Schools,” issued May 20, 2020, made the following recommendation: “The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC), which is the state’s monitoring and district self-evaluation system, should either be suspended or revised so that districts are not penalized for taking actions necessary to address the pandemic.”

Under current law, each school district must undergo a comprehensive NJQSAC review once every three years based on a schedule established by the education commissioner.

NJSBA has advocated for revision of the law in light of the pandemic. Legislation now on the governor’s desk would postpone the comprehensive NJQSAC review until the 2021-2022 school year. The proposal, Assembly Bill 4006/Senate Bill 2404, received final legislative approval on August 27.

***School districts should not be penalized for taking actions necessary to address the pandemic.***

The deferral would allow school districts and the New Jersey Department of Education, to focus resources on addressing the pandemic. The legislation would require the comprehensive review to be conducted during the 2021-2022 school year in any district (1) for which the 2019-2020 review was not completed due to the COVID-19-related school closures, or (2) which would have undergone a comprehensive review in 2020-2021. The bill would also allow school districts to ask the commissioner of education for an exemption from the postponement

### Accountability Regulations

When first promulgated in 2008, New Jersey’s school district Accountability Regulations, *N.J.A.C. 6A:23A*, were criticized for being overly prescriptive. For example, they set staffing ratios as a condition for receipt of state aid, restrict budgetary transfers, and establish administrative spending growth limits at the same time that districts are subject to a tax levy cap.

NJSBA believes that suspending many of these restrictions would enable school districts to act quickly on issues related to the pandemic. (For information on how changes in the regulations could help districts, see the 2016 report of the [NJSBA Task Force on New Jersey's Accountability Regulations](#).)

### **School Bus Driver Requirements**

In response to an NJSBA survey, over one-quarter of superintendents and school business administrators said they anticipated a shortage of school bus drivers. A number of school officials cited the need to change regulations pertaining to school bus driver certification.

However, changing regulation does not mean eliminating necessary security and safety procedures, but rather eliminating unnecessary requirements. New Jersey school bus drivers must obtain a [commercial driver's license](#) (CDL), with a [school bus endorsement](#). A concern has been expressed that some CDL requirements—for example, training in the repair of buses and ability to make such repairs—are not applicable to driving a school bus and slow down the licensing process.

### **The Critical Need for Change**

**To date, district superintendents, local boards of education and school communities have performed exemplary work in designing reopening plans that reflect the best interests of their students' education and health.**

**To continue progress and enable school districts to provide educational programs safely and effectively during the pandemic, NJSBA urges Congress, the state Legislature and other governmental bodies to move quickly in providing increased financial support and implementing critical changes in law and regulation.**

## II. The Journey to a New School Year

[Executive Order 175](#), issued by Governor Murphy on August 13, currently represents the official state policy on school district reopening plans for 2020-2021. In developing their reopening plans, school districts must indicate if they meet health standards, which reflect the [recommended protocols](#) issued by the state Department of Health to local and regional health agencies on the same date as the issuance of the Executive Order.

According to the state, if a district can meet the health standards, its reopening plan must include the provision of some level of in-person instruction as of the first day of school. If it cannot meet the health criteria by the first day of school, the district can reopen on a full virtual basis, but the plan must indicate how the district intends to meet the health standards and an estimate of when in-person instruction will be reestablished.

Executive Order 175 marked a departure from the state's initial July 26 reopening guidance, [The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education](#), which required that all districts provide some level of in-person instruction when the 2020-2021 school year begins.

*It became apparent that challenges remained as school districts contended with constant changes in the state's 'game plan.'*

As previously noted, NJSBA's special report, "Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools," focused on efforts to provide education during the pandemic and the challenges involved in the reopening of schools. Over the summer, it became apparent that many of those challenges remained as school districts contended with constant changes in the state's "game plan" to restart education.

### The Digital Divide Initiative

Since New Jersey's public school buildings closed in March, approximately 230,000, or 16%, of New Jersey's approximately 1.4 million public school students have not been able to fully participate in virtual instruction, according to Governor Murphy. On July 16, he announced a plan intended to ensure that all students have adequate internet access and the technological equipment necessary to participate in virtual instruction. Part of the state's Digital Divide initiative involves the use of new and existing funding sources, as well as philanthropic gifts.

### All-Virtual Option for Families

On July 24, the governor announced a supplement to the Road Back report, requiring that school districts offer parents the option of all-virtual instruction as an alternative to hybrid or in-person learning platforms.

Under [guidance](#) issued by the New Jersey Department of Education after Murphy's announcement, parents must be told about the opportunity in their own language. They must be given a deadline to respond, and districts must also explain how students may transition back to in-person or hybrid instruction at a later date, if they so choose. The governor said that the all-virtual option for families was made possible by the state's initiative to close the digital divide.

“We found the money to provide universal devices and internet access to every single kid going to school in this state,” he said. “So we’re now able to do something that we weren’t literally able to say, or talk about, or do, a month ago, and that’s a huge difference.”

### Face Coverings for All

Throughout the planning process, NJSBA and local school districts sought firmer guidance from the state on health and safety protocols. On August 3, Governor Murphy and the NJDOE addressed a question prevalent among local school officials by releasing supplementary guidance that requires students to wear [face coverings at all times](#) while inside a school building even if social distancing (e.g., six-foot separation) is maintained. Exceptions will only be allowed if wearing a face covering inhibits the individual's health.

Earlier state guidance required face coverings for all staff at all times, but for students only if social distancing (e.g., six-foot separation) could not be maintained.

### Planning Checklist

In June and July, while school districts were involved in developing their reopening plans, many local officials expressed a need for the Department of Education to provide a template with directions that were more concise than the Road Back report.

On August 3, the Department of Education posted a [“reopening checklist,”](#) on its website. The four-page document addresses the following topics: the planning process; the digital divide; general health and safety; classrooms, testing and therapy rooms; transportation; student flow, entry, exit and common areas; screening, PPE, and responses to students and staff presenting symptoms; contact tracing; facilities cleaning practices; meals, recess/-physical education, and extracurricular activities.

***Throughout the planning process, NJSBA and local school districts sought firmer guidance from the state on health and safety protocols.***

### Frequently Asked Questions

On August 5, at the urging of NJSBA and other state-level educational organizations, the state’s Commissioner of Health and Interim Commissioner of Education shared a list of [frequently asked questions and answers](#) with the NJSBA and other statewide education organizations. The document, posted on August 7, addresses face coverings, screening and testing, social distancing, contact tracing, restart plan development and submission, scheduling, and special education. It followed earlier NJDOE-issued [supplemental guidance](#) on screening, personal protective equipment, students and staff presenting COVID-19 symptoms, and transportation, issued on July 29 and August 3.

### Food Service Guidance

The state Department of Agriculture issued an [update on the provision of food services](#) on August 7. The document addresses requirements when providing meals to students, who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

### Department of Health Standards/Recommendations

Since the spring, NJSBA and other statewide education organizations continually pressed state officials for strong, direct, and clear health and safety guidelines, as well as information on the health metrics that would guide the reopening and/or closing of school buildings. On August 13, the state Department of Health released [COVID-19 Public Health Recommendations for Local Health Departments for K-12 Schools](#).

The document provides detailed guidance from the state Department of Health addressing illness in the school setting, the closing of schools, cleaning/disinfecting, actions if students or staff members test positive, daily symptom screening, and other actions. It also establishes a “risk matrix” based on transmission rates and other health data, to be applied within each of six regions of the state, that will guide school districts in determining if in-person instruction can continue and to what extent.

NJSBA continues to advocate for strong guidance and direction on health issues.

### Fall and Winter Sports

On August 20, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association released a [Return-to-Sports Plan, 2020-2021](#), with detailed schedules for fall and winter sports, including a contingency plan if the fall season cannot be completed.

### Additional Aid for School Reopening

On August 26, Governor Murphy announced the allocation of \$100 million from the state’s federal Coronavirus Relief Fund to districts to help defray costs incurred in reopening schools. Districts may use the funding to meet the health and safety standards required to provide in-person instruction. Those that already meet the health and safety protocols can use the funds to ensure continued satisfaction of the standards.

***NJSBA is committed to advocating for greater federal and state financial assistance.***

While the additional funds are appreciated, NJSBA remains committed to advocating for greater federal and state financial assistance to help local school boards provide educational programming during the pandemic.

### Guidance on Executive Order 175

On August 29, the New Jersey Department of Education released further [Guidance on Executive Order 175](#), which allows school districts to begin the academic year on an all-virtual basis if health standards cannot be met. The document also addresses the length of the school year and school day, as well as the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program.

### III. Approaches to Instruction

“Under the committed leadership of district superintendents, school communities have been performing exemplary work in designing reopening plans that reflect the best interests of their students’ education and health,” NJSBA Executive Director Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod said in an August 19 statement. He noted that the process has been particularly difficult due to ever-changing guidance.

#### Hybrid/Blended Learning: Most Common

In July, an NJSBA survey, conducted in July, showed that close to 80% of school officials indicated that their districts planned to start the 2020-2021 academic year with hybrid, or blended, instructional programs, as opposed to full in-person instruction (4.3%), with the remainder indicating that district plans had not yet been determined. At the time, full virtual instruction for all students was not an option.

The rules of the game changed midstream with the issuance of Executive Order 175 the following month. The governor announced that districts could resubmit the plans and propose beginning the academic year on a remote-only basis if they could document that they would not be able to meet health and safety standards.

On August 24, the governor announced that 436 of the 640 plans submitted to the Department of Education by public *and* non-public schools called for hybrid instructional platforms, according to an [article](#) posted by NJ.com. One hundred eighty would start the academic year on a virtual-only basis.

***‘We are setting up webcams so students can watch the teachers live and raise their hands, participate, and interact.’***

Such plans must estimate when the district will provide in-person instruction. Sixty-six districts are opening to all students for in-person instruction every day of the week, a spokesman for the governor said in an August 28 *New York Times* article.

Whether in-person instruction is introduced in September or later, the strategies under consideration by districts during the summer illustrate creativity in meeting the needs of the school community and the challenges of addressing social distancing, varying building configurations, and factors, such as transportation.

#### Variations on a Theme

Below are examples of approaches to hybrid instruction that were under consideration in local districts in mid-summer. The information is based on interviews with school officials and survey responses.

Three Cohorts A large K-12 school district in central New Jersey planned to divide students into three cohorts. To meet social distancing guidelines, only one-third of the student population would attend school in-person on any given day. Group A would meet on Tuesday, Group B would meet on Wednesday, and Group C would meet on Thursday.

Alternating schedules would be established for Mondays and Fridays. The group not physically in school on a certain day would attend class online. Virtual and in-person schedules for the same classes would match up, so that students would know, for example, that an English class begins at a certain time every day.

Three-Phase Program An elementary school district in northern New Jersey was considering a three-phase hybrid program that would increase classroom occupancy and in-person instructional time at each step. The plan would start with no more than 50% of the students in class on alternate days during September and October; a reassessment of scheduling and programming in October and November; and additional modifications, including possible conversion to in-person instruction five days a week, by January.

Three Options for Younger Students In mid-July, a northern New Jersey K-12 district was considering a plan that addressed the differing educational needs of younger and older students, as well as parental requests for full virtual instruction.

For students in prekindergarten through eighth grade, the plan would offer three choices:

- Option One: Students would come to school for part of the day, five days a week. Half of the students would have in-person instruction in the morning, studying core subjects such as English, math and social studies. The other 50% percent would study subjects such as art and music at home. At mid-day, the groups would switch. This option would apply to families that approve of students studying at home for a substantial part of the day.
- Option Two: Students would spend the entire day at school. Core subjects would be taught in-person either in the afternoon or morning. Subjects such as art, music and physical education would be provided for the remainder of the day, with instruction taking place in larger areas, such as the cafeteria, gymnasium or auditorium that would allow for social distancing.
- Option Three: All virtual or remote learning, with no in-person instruction.

In high school, the district would introduce an increasing amount of remote instruction at each grade level to provide a relevant educational experience for students preparing for college and the workplace, where they would assume more independence.

All-Virtual Math A central New Jersey elementary school district planned to assign students to two groups, which would alternate in-person and remote learning on a weekly basis. Under the plan, all math instruction in grades 5 through 8, which is provided at different levels, would be delivered virtually. It would avoid students switching classes within the school building and co-mingling. In addition, music art and applied technology would be provided on a virtual basis.

NJSBA's surveys also provided examples of various approaches to instruction.

- “Self-contained special education students will receive in-person instruction for the entire day. There will be a virtual component for those who choose not to return.” – Elementary District, Northern New Jersey

- “Flipped approach: Teachers use in-person time to focus on response to need and diagnostics through one-on-one and small group conferencing.” – Elementary District, Central New Jersey
- “We are intending to reopen to all students for a shortened day structure with all students attending 5-days per week.” – Elementary District, Northern New Jersey
- “For the virtual option, students who choose to not attend in person will log in every day to a Google Meet. We are setting up webcams so they can watch the teachers live and raise their hands, participate, and interact.” – Elementary District, Southern New Jersey



## IV. The Major Challenges

Many local boards of education find that their districts can meet appropriate health and safety standards and are prepared to reopen on a hybrid or full in-person basis. For various reasons, other school boards believe that it is in the best interest of students to begin the academic year on an all-virtual basis. For districts in both groups, points of concern have been funding, the supply chain for personal protective equipment and technology and adequate staffing, along with frequently shifting state directives and the need for firmer guidance in developing plans.

Even before Executive Order 175, which permits school districts to begin the academic year on an all-virtual basis under certain circumstances, NJSBA surveys showed concern about the ability to make necessary building alternations, to secure personal protective equipment and educational technology, and ensure sufficient staffing in time for a September school reopening.

### Funding

In a July 14 survey, NJSBA asked school officials the following question:

**Q:** *Was your district's ESSER allocation sufficient to cover its needs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* NOTE: The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, created under the federal CARES Act, provided [New Jersey school districts with] approximately \$280 million in grants to cover pandemic-related expenditures. Examples include personal protection equipment (PPE), training/professional development (for staff, parents), planning, maintenance (including sanitizing), technology (including hardware, broadband, learning management platforms), and physical alterations to accommodate social distancing and preventive measures (e.g., partitions, hand-washing stations, ventilation, etc.).

**A:** **The ESSER funding is not adequate, according to 61% of the business administrators and 63% of the superintendents who responded to the survey.**

As mentioned previously in this report, a [cost analysis](#) by the American Association of School Administrators and the Association of School Business Officials International indicates that districts nationwide can expect to spend an additional \$490 per student to cover costs of PPE, sanitizing supplies, and additional custodial staff and nurses.

Through surveys and interviews, NJSBA found that, to reopen schools, New Jersey's local districts have had to contend with costs that they were not fully aware of when developing their budgets for 2020-2021.

- For example, a 3,050-student elementary district in central New Jersey has allocated \$500,000 for health and safety enhancements, including hand-sanitizing stations.
- In northern New Jersey, a 752-student high school district has purchased thermal cameras for about \$1,000 each.
- A 1,700-student K-12 district in northern New Jersey invested in equipment to expedite daily temperature checks so that it could reduce the need for staff member involvement in the screening process. The equipment, which operates similarly to walk-through metal detectors or airport screening devices, costs approximately \$2,500 per unit.

### Personal Protective Equipment

Difficulty in acquiring personal protective equipment (PPE) in time for the first day of school has been cited by many school board members and administrators.

In a July 14 survey, the NJSBA asked:

**Q:** *Is your district encountering difficulty in securing personal protective equipment?*

**A: A majority of superintendents (52%) and over one-third of school business administrators (37%) said their districts were having a hard time obtaining PPE.**

For example, a K-12 district in northern New Jersey reports that special air filters for school HVAC systems were still on back-order with a little more than a month to go before the schedule reopening of school. And in mid-July, a superintendent from a K-12 district in southern New Jersey said all of the district’s PPE was on back order and scheduled for delivery during the last week in August, just prior to the scheduled first day of schools.

School business administrators commented on their experience in securing PPE:

- “Vendors are experiencing backlogs and are hesitant to provide shipping dates with reasonable certainty.” – Elementary District, Central New Jersey
- “Delivery date quoted for October.” – K-12 District, Northern New Jersey
- “It depends on the product. User-worn PPE seems attainable. COVID-certified cleaning products seem unobtainable.” K-12 District, Southern New Jersey
- “The supply chain has recently improved.” K-12 District, Southern New Jersey
- “We are all competing for the same resources. It would be helpful if the State and other entities purchased in bulk and then let us purchase from them.” – Elementary District, Central New Jersey

The state’s Road Back report lists several cooperative purchasing options available to school district to obtain PPE, including the NJSBA TEC program. However, districts still expressed a need for the state to play a more prominent role in helping them to secure the products necessary ensure a healthy school environment.

### Staffing

In May, NJSBA’s “New Normal” report cited data from the National Center for Education Statistics showing that one-third of the nation’s teachers were over the age of 50, placing them at greater risk to complications from COVID-19. The NJSBA report also cited an April 2020 study warning of a negative impact on staff retention once schools reopened.

When surveyed in July, most school officials were uncertain of the pandemic’s impact on staff retirement and attrition.

### Leaves of Absence/Need for Substitute Teachers

Now, however, as school reopening dates approach, staff requests for leaves-of-absence have become a factor in a number of the districts that planned to begin the academic year with hybrid or full in-person instructional programs.

In addition, some respondents to NJSBA surveys cited the supply of substitute teachers as an issue. “This is a major concern for districts. Substitutes will be difficult to retain due to the added risks associated with COVID-19,” wrote the superintendent of an elementary school district in southern New Jersey.

Many staff requests for leaves of absence are filed under the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and the New Jersey Family Leave Act. During an [August 19 webinar](#) for local school board members and administrators, NJSBA staff attorneys addressed [current employee leave provisions](#).

Effective April 1, 2020, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act temporarily expanded the Family Medical Leave Act to authorize leaves-of-absence for childcare when the school or childcare facility is closed or unavailable due to the pandemic. It provides 12 total weeks of leave (2 unpaid, 10 paid). The amendment remains in effect until December 31, 2020.

The New Jersey Family Leave Act, which addresses leaves of absence for medical reasons, was amended in the spring of 2020 to address “in-home care or treatment of a child because of closure of school or childcare [facility] by order of a public official.”

The laws require the granting of leave for qualifying employees and address required documentation, but they may also allow for a showing of undue hardship by the district.

### Childcare

In interviews and surveys over the summer, some district officials indicated they were looking into various strategies to address staff members’ childcare needs.

An elementary school district in southern New Jersey was exploring an agreement with a licensed childcare provider to serve staff members whose children are enrolled in other school districts that have different instructional schedules. The district’s superintendent indicated that the cost would be split among the district and teachers. Payment for the service had not been resolved at the time.

In a central New Jersey K-12 district, administrators were considering offering tuition-free attendance for the children of staff members who live out of district.

### Communication

In NJSBA’s surveys, school officials emphasized the importance of proactive communication with all stakeholders and, in particular, the involvement of staff when developing reopening plans. Also stressed were communicating about health and safety procedures, making accommodations for medical conditions, and recognizing childcare obligations.

Examples of comments follow:

- “Free supervised child care in the district for the children of our staff members”; “more than minimum standards implemented for safety”; “special accommodations...for any staff members with concerns about current planning as it pertains to their health” – Elementary District, Northern New Jersey

- “Being transparent and sharing the cleaning procedures with them. Also, trying to provide childcare for our teachers’ students through local community organizations” – Elementary District, Northern New Jersey
- “Individual meetings are being scheduled with each teacher to review staff concerns, accommodation requests, etc.” – K-12 District, Southern New Jersey
- “We are including our teachers in the discussions regarding the reopening plan. They will know what we are doing to provide the best possible scenario for opening schools.” – High School District, Northern New Jersey
- “We are preparing an environment that protects all occupants during in-person learning and a schedule that provides adequate time to balance the implementation of a hybrid model without overburdening our teachers.” – K-12 District, Northern New Jersey

### Guidance and Direction

In its surveys, NJSBA found a high level of concern among school administrators and board members about a lack of guidance and direction from the state. These opinions were expressed prior to the state’s issuance of a [reopening checklist](#) (August 3) and more extensive health protocols (August 13). At the time, districts had been involved in developing their plans for well over a month.

The superintendent of a 1,750-student K-12 district in northern New Jersey indicated that the district developed its plan by late July. In the absence of a New Jersey-issued reopening template and specific health protocols, the district turned to a contact tracing flow chart issued by another state to complete the project.

Feedback from school district officials provided during the summer follows:

- “Direction from the state [is needed] regarding Screening and Contact Tracing and circumstances for positive tests and quarantining.” – High School District, Southern New Jersey
- “Some support from the state dept. of health about who is required to be quarantined when an outbreak occurs, how distant those contacts need to be for quarantine or testing, and what are the parameters for complete shut-down. Who makes that call? Who has to be notified? None of us has Ph.D. in community health.” K-12 District, Northern New Jersey
- “The lack of specific and consistent health information is inhibiting my ability to make educational decisions. If the health information, such as what is required for daily student ‘visual screenings’ were specific, it would eliminate staff and families making comparisons among districts. It would also ensure that all districts are following the same health precautions.” – Elementary District, Southern New Jersey
- “The guidance from the state is extremely frustrating and lacks specifics. Providing districts with a template and specific reopening models to choose from would have been more helpful.” – Elementary District, Southern New Jersey

- “A checklist from the state for the plan would be helpful. I know we have the info in the Road Back, but I am sure the state will want a check list filled out with specific info. Why not share it now?” – K-12 District, Southern New Jersey
- “We really need guidance from the NJDOE, NJ Department of Health and NJ Department of Labor about how to address employees requesting not to return to in-person teaching. That number is growing exponentially every day. Teachers are providing doctor notes. What do we do if we can't accommodate everyone?” – Elementary District, Northern New Jersey

## V. School Reopening Plans in Nearby States

As New Jersey's schools complete their plans for the 2020-2021 school year, the vast majority are moving forward with hybrid platforms, combining virtual and in-person instruction through a variety of scheduling structures. In 66 districts, plans involve full in-person instruction. An estimated 180 school districts have submitted virtual-only plans. These numbers fluctuate based on New Jersey Department of Education review of the plans and district decisions to submit revised plans with different instructional formats than first envisioned.

Below is a summary of school reopening policies in nearby states, based on an initial review conducted in early August and further updates. Additional changes may have taken place since that time.

### Connecticut

Under the state's plan, [Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together](#) (updated August 3), local school districts "retain discretion in implementing the approach to full time reopening." Districts must also plan for hybrid and all-virtual alternatives if warranted by infection rates and other public health data.

The state's governor, who has urged a return to in-school instruction, said current data on the spread of COVID-19 would allow for in-school programming, but he will not mandate it. On August 3, the state issued [metrics](#), based on infection rates and other health data, to guide districts as they consider learning models for school reopening.

As in New Jersey, a learn-at-home option must be offered to families. Local education agencies "should develop temporary support options for students who continue remote learning from home..."

In a Fairfield County school district, [Opening Doors for a New Year of Learning: Darien's Reopening Plan](#), revised August 13, addresses instruction, equity and access, and operations, among other subjects. The document also establishes health and safety procedures in areas such as contact tracing and "exclusion" after positive COVID testing.

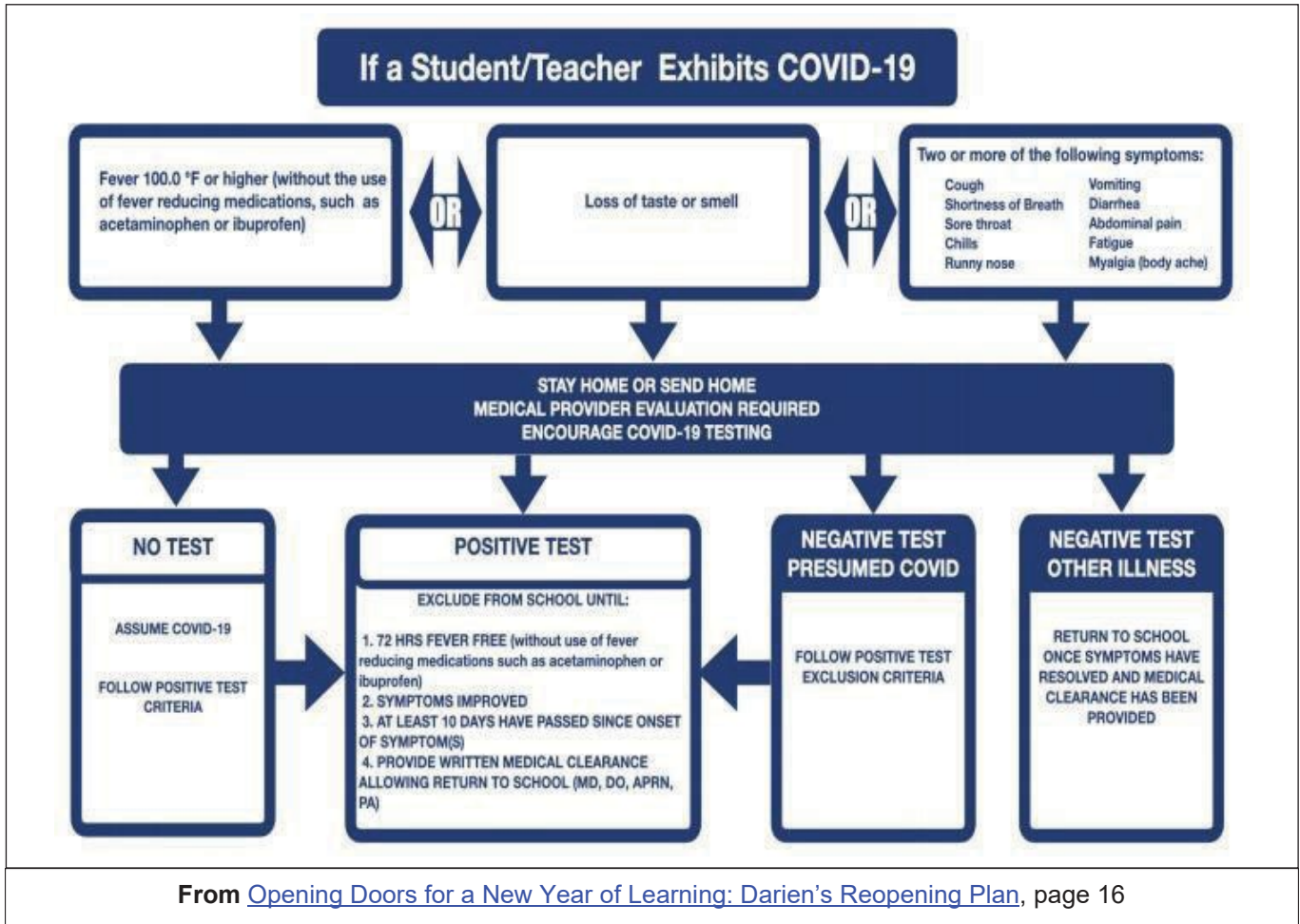
**Contact Tracing** All students or staff who have had close contact with an individual with confirmed COVID-19 in the school setting, will be notified by local health officials and based on current guidance, asked to quarantine for 14 days. The DPS School Nursing department will collaborate with the Darien Department of Health and assist with contact tracing of COVID-19 positive individuals, as appropriate. Contact tracing both in and outside of school will be initiated by local and State health officials.

All individuals excluded from school due to exposure will continue their schoolwork via remote learning as illness permits. Students who miss school due to illness will be allowed to make up work once symptoms of illness are resolved.

**COVID-19 Exclusion** If student or staff member has been in close contact (within 6 feet for 15 minutes or longer) with someone who has been diagnosed with or tested positive for COVID-19:

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- Quarantine for 14 days
- Watch for symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, chills, fatigue, myalgia)
- Seek advice of medical provider
- Notify school nurse



### New York

On July 16, the state’s education agency released guidelines, [Recovering, Rebuilding, And Renewing: The Spirit Of New York’s Schools: Reopening Guidance](#), which have been subject to supplements and revisions. The initial guidelines directed public schools to create a comprehensive plan for a schedule that includes in-person instruction, remote instruction, or a hybrid of both in-person and remote.

[The] plans should address a combination of in-person instruction and remote learning to facilitate a phased-in approach or hybrid model, which may be necessary at various times throughout the 2020-2021 school year. In cases where in-person instruction is not feasible, phased-in and hybrid models of education will need to consider if certain students will be prioritized for in-person instruction first or more frequently based on educational or other needs (e.g., early grades, students with disabilities, English language learners), and must balance this with equity, capacity, social distancing, PPE, feasibility, and learning considerations.

Earlier, Governor Cuomo announced that [specific criteria](#) based on infection rates and other data in each of the state’s ten regions would determine if the schools within that region could stay open for in-person instruction. The state’s education department maintains a website with all [updates and clarifications](#).

As in New Jersey, local school boards have called for additional resources to implement health and safety protocols. On July 29, the New York State School Boards Association released results of a [survey](#) showing that “a majority of [the state’s] school board members would like to see students go back to their classrooms on a full-time or part-time basis in September, but they have reservations about whether they can do that safely without additional funding...”

### Pennsylvania

Under [Preliminary Guidance for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Public Schools](#), issued June 3, districts may implement virtual-only, in-person only, or hybrid instructional models. Regardless of the model selected, families must be offered an all-remote instructional option. Even if in-person instruction is part of a district’s reopening plan, its continuation will depend on the level of community spread of COVID-19 within the county or region

The state designates three categories of infection rates:

- **Red** (substantial spread)—school buildings remain closed;
- **Yellow** (minimal-to-moderate spread) and **Green** (low or no community spread)—in-person instruction permitted following development of a district health and safety plan in compliance with state Department of Education and Health guidelines.

The state’s Department of Education provided a “Phased School Reopening Health and Safety Plan Template,” which districts can use to plan strategies for building sanitizing, maintenance and ventilation; social distancing; monitoring student and staff health; and health and safety professional development.

The East Stroudsburg Area School District developed an interactive [Health and Safety Q&A](#) for parents, providing information on subjects, such as:

- Screening and temperature checks (parents must perform them before sending children to school);
- Face coverings (required on buses, in hallways, upon arrival and at dismissal, and whenever a six-foot distance cannot be maintained), and
- School or classroom closings if a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19 (determination to be made in consultation with public health officials).



Delaware

On August 4, the governor, in consultation with the Division of Public Health, [announced](#) that schools could reopen on a hybrid basis. The state’s reopening plan, [Returning to School: Planning a Safe, Efficient and Equitable Return to School for Students and Staff](#), issued July 15, directs schools to be prepared to quickly switch learning platforms if conditions require. Similar to the reopening plan in neighboring Pennsylvania and now, New Jersey, it would limit the provision of in-person instruction if warranted by prevailing health conditions.

Planning Scenarios for Schools	<b>1</b> Minimal Community Spread	<b>2</b> Minimal-to-Moderate Community Spread	<b>3</b> Significant Community Spread
Description	Schools are open for in-person instruction.	Schools may use a hybrid model of remote learning and in-person learning options with precautions in place.	School buildings are closed — remote learning only.
Criteria			
New Cases <i>(per 100,000 people)</i>	Fewer than 10	10 to 100	More than 100
% of Persons Tested Positive	Less than 3%	3 to 10%	More than 10%
Avg. Daily Hospitalizations <i>(per 100,000 people)</i>	Fewer than 10	10 to 25	More than 25
Overall Rating*	2+ green	2+ yellow	2+ red

[School Reopening Criteria](#), Delaware Environmental Public Health Tracking Network, August 28, 2020

## VI. The Experience of Other Nations

As boards of education in New Jersey and the nation move toward reopening plans, it is reasonable to ask: What have other countries done? What can we learn from nations around the world that have already opened their schools?

In a review of articles and research published over the summer, a key theme emerges: Countries that successfully reopened their schools controlled the virus first. Articles in [Education Week](#), and the [vox.com](#) website offer summaries of strategies used when schools reopened in various nations.

In Denmark, the main strategy has been to keep the same group of students together throughout the day. They eat lunch at their desks and are socially distanced from others inside their group. Despite an initial uptick after schools reopened, infections among children between one and 19 years old declined from late April onward.

“You cannot see any negative effects from the reopening of schools,” Peter Andersen, an epidemiologist at the Danish Serum Institute, told the [Reuters](#) news service shortly after schools reopened in late spring.

In a July 7 article, [Science Magazine](#) reported that many nations, particularly in Asia, routinely require their students to wear masks, and that students comply with the request.

“In China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—where masks are already widely accepted and worn by many during flu season—schools require them for almost all students and their teachers,” [Science Magazine](#) reported. “China allows students to remove masks only for lunch, when children are separated by glass or plastic partitions.”

A July 6, 18-page summary of reopening practices around the world was published by a group of University of Washington researchers. The following observations are taken directly from the researchers’ published paper, “[Summary of School Re-Opening Models and Implementation Approaches During the COVID 19 Pandemic](#)”:

**Germany**—Schools were closed starting around March 3, 2020 and began reopening around May 4 for older students. Students were assigned their own fixed desks that are spaced at least 6 feet way from other desks. The fixed location of desks combined with student seating charts can be used by contact tracers if necessary.

School days have been shortened and are supplemented with online lessons. This allows multiple groups of students to share classrooms, which can hold no more than 10 students. In at least some schools, students are being tested for SARSCoV infection every 4 days, with a negative test allowing students to attend school without a facemask. In the context of moderate community transmission, school reopening in Germany has been accompanied by increased transmission among students, but not staff.

**Norway**—In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Norway were closed on March 11, 2020. Reopening of schools started on April 20 for kindergarten students followed on April 27 by students in first through fourth grades. The government recommended that classes be limited to no more than 15 students. Special precautions include having children wash their desks daily. Some schools have divided their playgrounds. School for students in grades five and above, and universities, remain closed. In the context of low community transmission, school reopening in Norway has not resulted in a significant increase in the growth rate of COVID-19 cases.

**France**—Starting on May 11, nursery and primary schools were re-opened across much of France. On May 18, schools were re-opened for students 11 to 15 years old only in “green zones” where community transmission was limited. The president of France announced that schools for students 15 to 18 years old would reopen on June 22. Class sizes have been reduced and facemasks are mandatory in secondary schools.

**Belgium**—Schools in Belgium were re-opened starting on May 18, with all nursery schools open by June 2, followed by all primary school grades by June 8. Classroom size is limited to no more than 10 students. Schools are using split schedules with students attending on alternate days. Teachers are encouraged to wear a facemask if social distancing is not guaranteed. Children are grouped by class throughout the school day, including on the playground.

**Switzerland**—Schools reopened in Switzerland on May 11, 2020 with strict social distancing measures in place. Many schools have cut class sizes in half and students attend in-person classes only two days per week to allow for space for the smaller class sizes. Desks have been moved further apart and tape marks have been placed on the floor to aid students in maintaining appropriate physical distance. Hand sanitizing stations have been added throughout schools. School re-opening for students in grade 10 and above and for university students was delayed until June 8.

**Greece**—Kindergarten and primary school students in Greece returned to school starting on June 1, 2020. Class sizes are limited to 15 students and desks are spaced five feet apart. Breaks are staggered to allow for physical distancing on playgrounds.

**Israel**—As of early May, Israel had experienced fewer than 300 deaths from COVID-19 and the government re-opened schools, along with restaurants and other public settings. Starting in early May, school re-opening was initially implemented by opening classes in smaller groups or “capsules.” By May 17, limitations on class size were lifted. Two weeks after school re-opening, COVID-19 outbreaks were observed in classrooms, including 130 cases in one school alone.

A July 14 [\*Wall Street Journal\*](#) report indicated that outbreaks in Israeli schools had infected at least 1,335 students and 691 staff as of July 13. Israel enacted a policy of closing for two weeks any school that had at least one known infected student or staff member and quarantining all those who work at or attend the school. This policy has led to the quarantine

of more than 28,000 students and educators, the *Journal* reported, adding that Israel has closed 125 schools and 258 kindergartens since May. In addition, Israel's education ministry has developed different models for the reopening of the schools in the fall to be used depending on the level of infections.

Each plan will be applied according to the local infection level, rather than nationally, according to Inna Zaltsman, a senior education ministry official, the *Journal* said.

## VII. The Road Ahead

The New Jersey School Boards Association intends for this report to be a call to advocacy for funding, resources and support to enable school districts to serve their students during the pandemic. It should also function as an information source as school reopening plans evolve for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Our state's school communities have made an exemplary effort to develop reopening plans. The New Jersey Departments of Education and Health also face the challenge of navigating uncharted waters and have recently responded to the concern of local school districts with firmer guidance, direction and support. Nonetheless, as this report illustrates, more needs to be done.

When interviewed for this report, a Morris County school official noted that two words have become a regular part of her vocabulary: “Fluid” and “pivot.” Indeed, school districts must be prepared to change direction quickly—either before or after the start of the academic year—if determined by the state based on health data.

Against this backdrop, the New Jersey School Boards Association remains committed to providing local school boards with the information and guidance they need to govern public education and meet the needs of their students during the pandemic, whether instruction takes place remotely, in the classroom, or both.