



# Building Off the Blueprint for Back to School

By John P. Bailey

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## Key Points

- Schools that have reopened across Europe offer important lessons for schools in the United States, including the need to accommodate parents who feel it is unsafe to send their children back to school.
- States are releasing their own guidance for reopening schools. Many plans include staggered schedules, social and emotional learning supports, and academic acceleration.
- Across income levels, racial demographics, and political ideology, parents believe their children are spending less time on schoolwork (40 percent) and are learning less (46 percent) than they normally would in school. Schools in the fall must work toward alleviating this learning loss.

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A month has passed since the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) released *A Blueprint for Back to School*, which offered a framework for safely reopening schools in the fall.<sup>1</sup> The report reflected the insights from 20 former federal officials, state school chiefs, and superintendents, many drawing on their experiences leading education systems through times of crisis.

Given that school reopening plans need to adapt with new information, it is worth taking a moment to review some of the developments over the past month and their implications for reopening schools in the fall.

## New CDC Guidance

At the end of May, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released an additional 60 pages of guidance for various organizations, including

schools.<sup>2</sup> Some notable highlights from the CDC's guidance include:

- Staff should wear face coverings in all steps of reopening.
- Schools should increase ventilation of outside air.
- Children should be kept in small class cohorts throughout the day.
- Schools should turn all student desks to face the same direction and space them six feet apart.
- Students should eat in their classrooms.
- Schools should conduct daily health checks of staff and students.
- Schools should provide options for remote learning for students and staff who are at higher risk.

Many of these recommendations were included in *A Blueprint for Back to School*, but now schools have official health guidance to plan around.

## Lessons Learned from Schools Reopening Internationally

Perhaps the best sense of what American schools will look like in the fall comes from schools reopening in Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK.

The Learning Policy Institute provided a helpful overview of the health and safety practices being used for schools in other countries.<sup>3</sup> For example, France reopened schools with class sizes limited to 10 at the preschool level and 15 in elementary schools. Parents are required to take their children's temperature every morning. Teachers must wear masks, and children are required to use hand sanitizer throughout the day. Common among all the countries is physically spacing out desks in classrooms and cleaning classrooms throughout the day. Some schools are even moving classes outside.

There is some reason to be optimistic, as most health officials in these countries believe there is low risk of children developing COVID-19. The British government released an overview of scientific advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which concluded that "there is no evidence to suggest that children transmit the virus any more than adults."<sup>4</sup> In Denmark, sending children back to schools and day care centers did not lead to an increase in coronavirus infections.<sup>5</sup>

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But despite all these health declarations, precautions, and research, parents seem skeptical. School leaders in the UK predict that more than 42 percent of parents will keep their children at home.<sup>6</sup> Parents in France are also anxious about sending their children back to school.<sup>7</sup>

There are three big takeaways from the experiences abroad:

1. Schools had to organize around a series of health measures that align closely with those recommended by the CDC.<sup>8</sup> Their experiences can help inform how American schools can arrange their classrooms and restructure their class schedules.
2. Reopening schools did not cause a significant rebound of the virus, which many had feared. That lends more credence to schools in the US being able to open in the fall.
3. Earning the trust of parents and teachers may be the most significant obstacle to reopening schools. Early experiences in France and the UK showed that many do not believe the official health assessments and that many are choosing to keep their children at home. A June 3 poll of US families found that only 48 percent would send their child to school if restrictions were lifted.<sup>9</sup> This sentiment needs to be closely monitored over the next several months.

## The Looming School Personnel Crisis

According to various bodies of medical research, those over age 65 are disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19. In fact, the CDC found that individuals older than age 55 account for more than 92 percent of all COVID-19 deaths in the US.<sup>10</sup>

*A Blueprint for Back to School* notes that this poses a challenge for school systems.<sup>11</sup> A separate AEI analysis dug deeper into the challenge and found that over half a million public and private school teachers are in the most at-risk age range for COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> Private schools face greater challenges, with 25 percent of teachers and 44 percent of principals in this age range. Perhaps most concerning is that these measurements underestimate the scope of the challenge. A survey of the Connecticut Education Association's 3,000 members found that an astonishing 43 percent are at higher risk of severe illness.<sup>13</sup>

This creates two personnel challenges for schools. First, they will need to find new roles for teachers who may have to continue sheltering in place at home due to the risk of coming to school. Some of these teachers could be reassigned to serve as online instructors or tutors, but some might want

to simply retire. Online platforms such as Out-school, Weekdays, BetterLesson, and Tutor.com can help teachers onboard into these new roles and assist schools and families with finding skilled teachers.<sup>14</sup> States and school districts may also want to consider using early retirement incentives for teachers who are nearing retirement and are not comfortable with transitioning to an online role.

Second, schools will need to find other teachers who can come to school, creating new substitute teacher challenges. Citing our research, the *New York Times* Editorial Board noted, “This could create a staff shortage at precisely the time when districts are trying to lower the risk of spreading infection by cutting class size and staggering schedules to limit population density in school buildings.”<sup>15</sup> Online platforms such as Swing Education can help schools with recruiting substitute teachers.<sup>16</sup> However, state policymakers may need to consider providing additional flexibility with teacher certifications to allow schools to recruit from out of state.

The lack of attention this is receiving is surprising. The American Federation of Teachers’ reopening plan barely references it, much less provides any recommendations for schools and policymakers.<sup>17</sup> Most state reopening plans do not address it. Nevertheless, reopening schools is difficult if teachers cannot be in the classroom.

## States Are Releasing Their Reopening Plans

States are gradually releasing guidance to inform school plans, many of which reflect ideas contained in *A Blueprint for Back to School*.

**Louisiana.** Louisiana launched a dedicated “Strong Start to 2020” page with resources for schools as they prepare for the next school year, including curriculum providers and suggestions for diagnostic and screening assessments.<sup>18</sup> The state is orienting its work around three goals:

1. There is a plan for every student, including extra time and support for students with the greatest unfinished learning from the prior year.

2. There is a plan for students to hear from teachers every day and for students to receive feedback and engagement on their work every week.
3. There are clear next steps for every high school student and recent graduate, who will enter a new economy.

**Ohio.** Ohio released detailed draft guidance to help schools prepare for reopening. It touches on equity issues, personalized learning, social and emotional learning, and professional development.<sup>19</sup>

**Maryland.** Maryland’s guidance for schools includes recommendations for mental health, academics, and online learning. It discusses possibilities such as shifting school calendars to include summer instruction, extending the school day with instruction in the morning or afternoon, and even providing evening sessions.<sup>20</sup>

**Colorado.** Colorado’s reopening plan includes guidance on continuity of learning, health, and individualized response to student needs.<sup>21</sup> The state launched a \$33 million innovation fund to support locally driven solutions that advance equity and solutions to structural problems.<sup>22</sup> The governor also predicted that class size could be doubled to 20 students if the emerging health research suggests it is safe.<sup>23</sup>

**Other Resources.** Other guides are also helping states and schools operationalize parts of *A Blueprint for Back to School*. One notable example is the planning guide released by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching,<sup>24</sup> whose CEO, Candice McQueen, participated in the development of *A Blueprint for Back to School*. The document provides a list of guiding questions to assist schools with thinking through decisions against four scenarios, ranging from all students are in physical buildings to all students are learning remotely.

## Insights into How Parents Are Navigating COVID-19

AEI is analyzing weekly surveys, conducted by Echelon Insights, of 500 public school parents and their thoughts concerning coronavirus.<sup>25</sup> The results

of these surveys, which began in late April, provide a unique insight into parents' evolving concerns and experiences with COVID-19.

**Economic Insecurity.** More than 60 percent of families making less than \$50,000 are worried about making ends meet, compared with 30 percent of families making more than \$75,000. A similar pattern reflects how financial security is associated with higher levels of education. Nearly 60 percent of parents with a high school diploma or less say they are worried, compared with just 30 percent of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher.

**Use of CARES Act Relief Funds.** There is a clear trend toward using the \$1,200-per-adult and \$500-per-child cash benefit provided under the CARES Act to meet basic needs. Over four weeks, more parents reported using their benefit to buy groceries (up from 27 percent to 37 percent) and pay for utilities, including internet access (up from 24 percent to 34 percent).

**Digital Divide.** Through multiple weeks and various questions, parents have signaled that they need additional help with the devices and connectivity

required to support remote learning. There is widespread support (all above 70 percent) for closing the home-connectivity gap—across race, income, and political groups.

**Learning Loss.** Across income levels, racial demographics, and political ideology, parents believe their children are spending less time on schoolwork (40 percent) and are learning less (46 percent) than they normally would in school.

**Mental Health.** Parents report that their children are feeling lonely (31 percent), anxious (28 percent), and scared (18 percent), and they think that providing counseling and mental health support for students and staff is crucial (65 percent).

## Conclusion

A month later, the basic framework of *A Blueprint for Back to School* still holds. As we noted in the report, it is most important for school leaders to develop a process that can quickly adapt to the lessons learned from other schools. Planning for the fall must be adaptable to guidance that comes from public health officials over the next several months.

## About the Author

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## Notes

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