[Image description: Two masculine-presenting, elementary-aged students of Color and one feminine-presenting student of Color, wearing masks writing in workbooks in the first row of a classroom. Sitting behind and beside them are students writing in workbooks at desks.]

MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity by Design:

Guidance on Reopening Schools: Equity Considerations During COVID-19

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Guidance on Reopening Schools: Equity Considerations During COVID-19

ACRONYMS

CDC- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

EOSL- English to Speakers of Other Languages

ESL- English as a Second Language

ESSER- Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

FERPA- Family and Educational Rights & Privacy Act

IDEA- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IDOE- Iowa Department of Education

INDOE- Indiana Department of Education

IEP- Individual Education Plan

IFSP- Individualized Family Service Plans

ISBE- Illinois State Board of Education

KSDE- Kansas Department of Education

LRE- Least Restrictive Environment

MDE- Michigan Department of Education

MDESE- Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

MDHSS- Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

MNDOE- Minnesota Department of Education

MTSS- Multi-tiered Systems of Support

NDDPI- North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

NDE- Nebraska Department of Education

OHDE- Ohio Department of Education

OSDE- Oklahoma State Department of Education

PBIS- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

PPE- personal protective equipment

SEL- Social Emotional Learning

SDDE- South Dakota Department of Education

UNCF – United Negro College Fund

UDL- Universal Design for Learning

WDPI- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

WIDA- World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment

Introduction

This *Equity by Design* brief discusses the equity issues that inevitably arise in the context of schooling, where conditions of access are exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. It also provides recommendations for how district and school leaders can incorporate explicit attention to fostering inclusive school environments in planning and policy as schools reopen. The authors examine state plans and guidance for reopening schools across states in the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC) region which includes the 13 states of Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. This paper is not intended to present a comprehensive list of guidance from states, and the authors are aware that guidance around school reopening plans is constantly being reviewed, updated, and modified given unfolding conditions amid a global pandemic. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to provide explicit consideration of equity issues in the context of reopening schools, provide ideas for creating more inclusive school environments, and generate discussion about the topics addressed.

As schools reopen during a global health crisis where inequities have been both brought to the forefront in national discourse, and exacerbated by economic decline disproportionately affecting students from disinvested and minoritized communities, it is imperative that districts

and schools consider opportunities to redress and confront inequities in the context of schooling. As stated in the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) plan:

> The current devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and social unrest accelerated by the murder of Mr. Floyd have provided us with an opportunity to demonstrate American ingenuity and commitment to our children and to display our creative problem-solving skills in the face of these unprecedented life-altering events. (ISBE, 2020, p. 7)

These challenges, in combination with civil resistance against racial oppression, present an opportunity for school leaders to not only combat systemic racism in school systems, but to incorporate explicitly anti-racist practices into the work (Jackson et al., 2020). This paper compares state guidance and recommendations for reopening schools concerning the following topics: 1) time spent in face-to-face instruction vs. virtual or hybrid learning environments and any calendar changes; 2) screening and reporting of COVID-19 symptoms and exposure; 3) social distancing, face masks and classroom set up; 4) ensuring more equitable learning for students with dis/abilities and multilingual learners; 5) access to technology; 6) opportunities and challenges in online learning, 7) communication with parent/caregivers; 8) addressing learning loss; 9) guidance on Social Emotional Learning (SEL); and 10) guidance on field trips and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

As school and district leaders review and revise policy implementation, the guidance outlined in this paper can inform the way that policy is implemented, and can help highlight issues around equity that district and school personnel may not have considered in planning for reopening. Failing to identify and label inequities in and across systems not only makes it difficult to address these issues, but also leads to inconsistencies and omissions of important equity considerations. For instance, some state plans make no mention of the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on minoritized groups such as Students of Color. In contrast, other plans explicitly discuss racial disparities in access and use an asset-based approach to instruction and relationship-building with parents and caregivers.

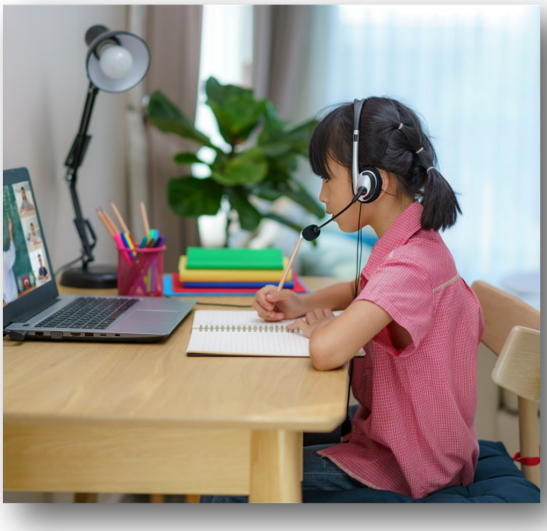
Time in Face-to-Face Learning, Virtual and Hybrid Learning Environments and Calendar Changes

The decision to reopen schools, and at what capacity, raises important moral and ethical considerations with implications for exposing educators, students, and families to a greater risk of contracting COVID-19 (Faden et al., 2020). Great uncertainty about how and when to reopen schools early on during the pandemic characterized discussions around reopening schools (Tingley, 2020; Meckler & Strauss, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns schools have the potential to exacerbate community spread in areas with high COVID-19 cases (CDC, 2020a). In-person learning is safer in communities with low transmission rates (Leeb, 2020).

Schools Unlikely to be Primary Drivers of Transmission in Communities

Recent studies have suggested that transmission of the virus within schools has not occurred at levels expected (Martin, 2020; Meckler & Strauss, 2020). A Brown University longitudinal study utilizes an ongoing, longitudinal survey collected from over 1,000 schools across the U.S. beginning the week of August 31st, 2020 (Oster, 2020a). Schools are recruited via "word of mouth, social media campaigns, principal associations and independent and charter school associations." Data is self-reported on a bi-weekly basis (Oster, 2020b, Recruitment section). In a two-week period beginning August 31st, the study found that 0.23 percent of students and 0.49 percent of students had a "confirmed or suspected case of the coronavirus" (Meckler & Strauss, 2020, para. 8). Additionally, when focusing on confirmed cases, the rates were even lower with 0.078 percent reported infections for students and 0.15 percent for teachers. However, it is unclear how much of the variation across schools is correlated with the use of policies to ensure mask-wearing and social distancing (Meckler & Strauss, 2020).

In an interview with *National Public Radio (NPR)*, Dr. Emily Oster, Professor of Economics at Brown University and creator of the Brown University data set on COVID-19 cases, suggested that the data from the study demonstrates that schools are not centers of transmission, but instead are likely to reflect the number of cases existent in the community. She further noted that it is possible more affluent schools with a greater enrollment of white students have more resources to adhere to social distancing and mask guidelines (Martin, 2020). Oster qualified the findings of the study, stating "I don't think that these numbers say all places should open schools with no restrictions or anything that comes close to that. Ultimately, school districts are going to have different attitudes toward risk" (Deese, 2020, para. 9). The findings of the Brown University study are



[Image description: Feminine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color, learning virtually at home on a desk.]

supported by a review of several studies in *Science* magazine, which found that evidence from multiple studies suggested that children and adolescents are less susceptible to the coronavirus, and that educational settings do not appear to be primary conduits of virus transmission when mitigation is in place (Snape & Viner, 2020).

Additionally, most recent CDC guidance from February 12th, 2021, also cites several studies suggesting that schools are not likely to be a primary driver in transmitting the virus. The CDC cites evidence that infection and transmission rates among

elementary-age children are lower than infection and transmission among middle school and high school students (CDC, 2021a). At the same time, because of asymptomatic spread among children, large-scale randomized testing and contract-tracing over time in schools is needed to give a better understanding of how schools may or may not operate as sites of transmission under varying conditions (Tingley, 2020). Sara Johnson, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, asserts that recent findings like these suggest that schools should bring students back "slowly and carefully," and with safeguards to protect teachers and staff members (Meckler & Strauss, 2020).

Despite competing arguments and lack of conclusive studies on the role of schools in COVID-19 outbreaks, schools remain an important source of resources that communities rely upon, providing services that enrich the lives of millions of children in the U.S. Schools provide childcare, meals, medical care, and safety; school personnel account for almost one-fifth of child abuse reporting. Further, students learning virtually progress at a slower rate than their in-person counterparts (Faden et al., 2020). Inequities may be exacerbated by the many barriers that students from marginalized communities encounter in an online learning environment.

Both the health considerations of the pandemic, and the inequitable implications of how schools reopen, are important factors to weigh in deciding how and when to reopen schools.

According to Faden et al. (2020), 10% of children live with grandparents, a population that is particularly vulnerable in terms of the potential impacts of COVID-19. People living in disinvested or low-income, communities of Color are a population disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Villarosa, 2020). These communities are more likely to be comprised of essential workers, further increasing their exposure to the virus and the consequences of infection. Most essential jobs are impossible to complete remotely, resulting in a lack of adult presence to assist in supervision and learning if schools are virtual. The ISBE (2020) recommends districts consider that not only may students be home alone while caregivers are working, but they may also be responsible for siblings or ill family members. Additionally, they may be working to support the family, coping with the loss of a family member, or suffering from anxiety or depression. Even in the context of closed schools, it is important to make sure students have access to school meals (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020).

Deciding When and How to Reopen

Several state plans advise in-person classes when conditions of community spread are low. According to the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction's (NDDPI) (2020) guidance, depending on local conditions, there should be a phased approach to schools restarting that is pulled from the *North Dakota K-12 Smart Restart* Plan. There is a red or critical risk, which is characterized by the highest level of disease risk, ranging to the blue or new normal where healthy practices such as hand washing and staying at home when sick must still be followed. Some states stipulate

that specific student populations are to be prioritized for in-person learning, including students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), multilingual learners, and elementary-age students (ISBE, 2020; KSDE, 2020). Most states suggest a hybrid model, although reliance on a hybrid approach may extend already existent learning loss if attention is not paid explicitly to considerations discussed throughout this paper about inequities (Faden et al., 2020). In determining a plan, many states do not provide specific guidance on when to engage in in-person learning. In contrast, the Michigan Department of Education (2020) is explicit that in-person learning will not occur unless certain conditions are met related to the management and responses to cases: 1) the number of cases has decreased even though the total number of cases is still high; 2) new outbreaks are swiftly managed with tracing and testing; and 3) hospitals have the capacity to handle outbreaks. Mitigating the spread of the virus will still require social distancing and other precautions, but schools can operate some level of in-person school when these conditions are met.

Similarly, the Minnesota Department of Education recommends transitions to a hybrid learning model when those who are sent home with influenza or a COVID-19-like illness becomes five percent of the total number of students and staff in a school in one week. Additionally, distance learning only is recommended when there is an uncontrolled community spread and/or multiple confirmed cases among students and staff (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). In contrast to Minnesota Department of Education's use of community indicators, the South Dakota Department of Education (SDDE) (2020) encourages schools to consider staggered schedules and blended learning if "substantial cases are found in the building".

The latest guidance issued by the CDC uses a color-coded system to make specific recommendations for reopening schools based on the rate of community spread in a seven-day period, and whether testing is implemented to screen students, teachers, or staff (screening testing) is implemented. Low community spread (zero to nine) new cases per 100,000 per seven days is coded blue, and moderate spread (10 to 49 new cases) is coded yellow. At a low or moderate rate of community infection, schools should consider returning to in-person learning with mitigation strategies in place (discussed in more detail below). Schools with a higher level of transmission (50 to 99 new cases coded as orange) may consider limited reopening with mitigation strategies in place. At the highest level of community transmission (coded red with more than 100 cases per 100,000), elementary schools may reopen with hybrid instruction and mitigation, but middle and high schools should be virtual unless mitigation strategies can be implemented, and schools have only a few cases (CDC, 2021a). Some experts have expressed concern that these guidelines are particularly difficult to implement because most communities would only be able to engage in hybrid learning given current levels of community spread (Keefe, 2021).

Cohorting Reduces Risk, but May Reproduce Inequity

A hybrid model—a blend of online and in-person learning—is the most common

suggestion by states. Phased opening plans include the hybrid model—beginning the school year virtually and slowly returning to in-person learning by grade level (Oklahoma State Department of Education [OSDE], 2020). Rotational models include students attending in-person for a half-day to four days, and virtually learning during the remainder (KSDE, 2020; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [WDPI], 2020a). Most hybrid models implement other strategies such as cohorting and staggering.

Cohorting, also known as pods, limits each students' exposure to a consistent and small number of people. The CDC notes cohorting as an important strategy, as it allows more ability to control the spread of the virus if an outbreak were to occur, only affecting those in the suspected cohort (CDC, 2020a). Cohorting is a part of A/B models. For instance, students are disaggregated into two groups, where the first group attends in-person for the first week. The following week, the second group attends. Strategically scheduling cohorts can reduce the likelihood that students from different cohorts interact in a school day (CDC, 2020a; KSDE, 2020). The latest guidance from the CDC highlights the challenges with cohorting when multilingual learners and students with dis/abilities are included in the cohort, but work with staff who are mobile (e.g., speech-language pathologists, Title I targeted assistance teachers). In these cases, the CDC recommends the use of detailed contact-tracing logs, along with the provision of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and children that work with mobile staff (CDC, 2021a).

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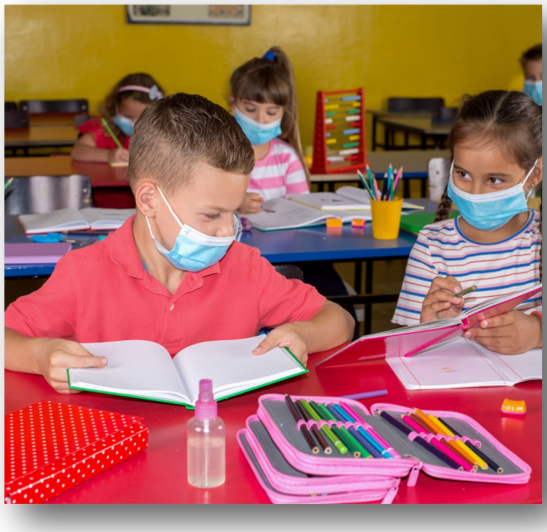
In the context of community spread, cohorting presents unique equity concerns because it may allow more privileged families (where adults may work from home) to isolate themselves from exposure to the virus—while communities with a higher incidence of COVID-19 cases (communities of Color and disinvested communities) may not have the same ability to limit exposure. Many marginalized families live in multi-generational homes where income earners work in the service sector, increasing the chance of exposure and infection. When keeping cohorts or pods of students together with one teacher, social distancing becomes a rather large concern when said teacher is absent. Who will provide instruction to these students in the teacher's absence? To maintain cohorts or pods, the number of adults needed for supervision increases as well. For example, during student lunch periods, typically one to two adults, along with the nutritional services staff, are used to monitor a large cafeteria. However, when students are required to eat in their classroom, it creates the need for more supervision. With multiple classrooms requiring supervision instead of one lunchroom where students would be housed, the number of available people to supervise is limited. At the same time, some communities of Color are working to use the podding or cohorting system to share the burden of childcare, add diverse curriculum to children's learning, and create their own communities of shared exchange.

Another hybrid model proposes in-person learning for elementary students, and virtual

learning for secondary students (OSDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). This model is built on the assumption that children are less likely than adolescents to contract and severely experience the virus. As knowledge about COVID-19 evolves, so too should considerations around this learning model. The CDC's analysis of cases from July to September confirms that youth contracted the virus at half the rate as adolescents. Further, hospitalizations and morbidity were low for children, although those who were hospitalized or died lived with underlying conditions, and were often from communities of Color (Leeb, 2020). A rare, but serious condition known as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C) has led to



[Image description: Masculine-presenting, elementary school-aged student and feminine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color, wearing masks, reading books together.]

severe complications for some children that have contracted COVID-19 (CDC, 2020b). Flu season is predicted to overlap with the COVID-19 pandemic; this increases health risks within the school environment, as school-aged children are at higher risk of flu -related complications (CDC, 2020c).

Recommendations for how much time students spend learning synchronously or in a setting where teachers and students are working together in a shared learning environment, either in a virtual or in-person setting, are dependent on the state. Illinois is explicit that students are required to receive five hours of instruction per day. While not mandatory, Illinois highly encourages half of the instructional hours to be synchronous (ISBE, 2020). The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) also has strict requirements on instruction time, connecting attendance to funding. For a student to be funded as full-time, they are to have six hours of instruction per day. These hours are not specified to be synchronous but are only valid if a log is complete with student and caregiver signatures. Students are also required to have a "meaningful connection" with at least one teacher via telephone or video (KSDE, 2020). The added bureaucracy of counting instructional time can inhibit funding for schools and be significantly detrimental to schools of Color that tend to be negatively affected by traditional school finance policy (Alemán, 2007). As mentioned in other aspects of this report, synchronous learning is highly dependent on fast and reliable internet connection—a utility that is often inaccessible to students from disinvested communities and rural areas (Molnar et al., 2019; Riddlesden & Singleton, 2014).

In addition to structuring the learning day, states encourage districts to reimagine the traditional school calendar (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020; KSDE, 2020). Increasing the length of the school year can compensate for decreased, synchronous instruction time

(Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020). Some state departments recommend segmenting the school year into virtual and non-virtual weeks, as well as being strategic in holiday breaks, to be mindful of the unpredictable nature of the pandemic overlapping with flu season and weather conditions (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE & Illinois Department of Public Health [IDPH], 2020). Overall, most states are flexible and encourage districts to make decisions based on the varied needs

> … schools should "ensure that their policies follow the recommendations of local public health officials and are consistent with Federal, state, and local laws…

of their specific communities. For example, the Indiana Department of Education (2020) provides a goal of 180 instructional days, but is explicit in granting permission to adjust as needed.

Looking at School Data Through an Equity Lens

Data-driven decisions with a focus on ensuring more equitable access for marginalized groups can lead to more equitable outcomes. However, without an explicit attention to equity issues, data collection may mask disparate experiences and outcomes for students. It is recommended that districts conduct formative evaluations throughout the school year to identify possible gaps in learning, disaggregated by student demographic characteristics (KSDE, 2020). For instance, collecting and analyzing student data relevant to need is frequently mentioned throughout the Iowa Department of Education's plan (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c). The following note is always added to these statements, "Note: Consider that many teachers and staff may not have experience with reliable and valid online and other remote learning assessment practices. If this is the case, additional professional learning may be needed," however, a discussion of how inequities will be surfaced through the approach is missing. Similarly, the ISBE's goal of utilizing data to identify students with the greatest need is admirable, but it is unknown the kind of instrument that will be utilized to do this. Although there are many instruments that exist, careful attention to surfacing inequities should be explicit in the use of methodology. The ISBE recommends that data should be collected as students, parents, and staff return to in-person instruction through an equity lends to "determine what student groups may need greater supports to meet high standards in a Remote or Blended Remote Learning environment" (ISBE, 2020, p. 10).

Through surveys on preference and feedback based on experiences with closing schools in the Spring of 2020, districts will be able to see the kinds of supports needed for specific student populations (ISBE, 2020; Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2020; SDDE, 2020). Further, caregiver involvement in these decisions leads to more culturally competent policies (Morton, 2017). Leveraging community stakeholders can also strategically inform decisions. To illustrate, the ODE (2020) used feedback from the Ohio Association of Student Leaders to choose a hybrid model.

Screening and Reporting of COVID-19 Cases

From a perspective of ensuring equity, it is important that screening for and reporting cases of COVID-19 are evaluated not only to manage COVID-19 infections, but also to ensure privacy, and to mitigate learning loss and stigmatization. Some authors highlight that disclosing personal information may induce anxiety for families of undocumented immigrants and those experiencing domestic violence, as well as for families concerned about the potential stigma surrounding a positive and identifying COVID-19 diagnosis (Faden et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2020). Parents and caregivers may be dependent financially on jobs where sick time is not compensated, such that the quarantine period is a threat to one's livelihood. State guidelines included in this analysis do not mention privacy concerns, but often defer to the Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). At the district level, staff and administration should be cognizant of these sensitivities as it relates to contact-tracing, providing the minimum necessary amount of information (Rothstein, 2020).

Overwhelmingly, states refer to CDC guidelines in screening and evaluating symptoms, last updated in December of 2020—although most differ with the CDC recommendations against screening all students for COVID-19 symptoms as they enter school buildings. Instead, the CDC encourages parents and caregivers to monitor children for symptoms (CDC, 2020a). South Dakota utilizes the CDC's at-home screening form, and Michigan encourages at-home screening as a primary tool (Michigan Department of Education, 2020; SDDE & South Dakota Department of Health [SDDH], 2020). In other states, at-home screening is considered a secondary recommendation, or to be pursued in tangent with in-school screenings (Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services & Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MDHSS & MDESE], 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Where school screenings are implemented, schools should "ensure that their policies follow the recommendations of local public health officials and are consistent with federal, state, and local laws, including FERPA" and contact their local health departments concerning questions of implementation (CDC, 2020a, Recommendations of local public health authorities section). Indiana leaves the decision to local districts such that they may opt for, "self-screening, school-based screening, and/or medical inquiries" (Indiana Department of Education, 2020, p. 10).

Some states direct school districts to consult CDC resources, but also explicitly recommend daily screenings of students for symptoms, including observational and temperature screenings (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; MDHSS & MDESE, 2020; Minnesota Department of Health, 2020a; Nebraska Department of Education [NDE], 2020; OSDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). In the case of temperature screenings, the MDHSS & MDESE (2020) highlight the potential for lines of students forming, inhibiting social distancing. If at-home screening is implemented, families' access to medical equipment, such as thermometers, should be considered.

Recommendations against observational or physical screenings are supported by unreliable screening and concerns for

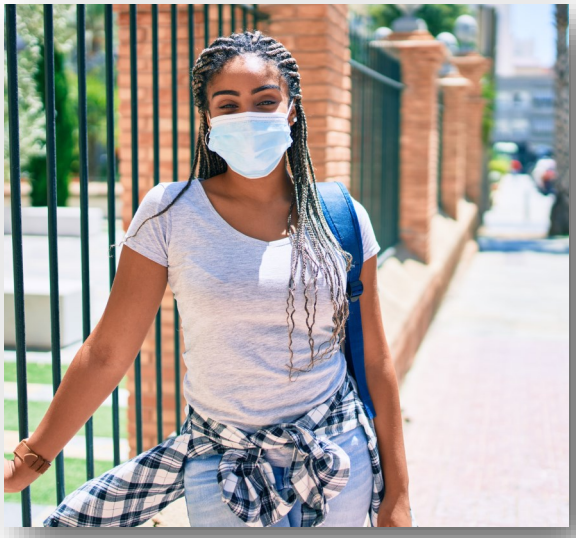
learning loss. Observational screenings will not be able to identify all children that are asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic. Recent studies have suggested about 16% of children with COVID-19 do not develop symptoms. Additionally, removal from the learning environment is detrimental to childhood development. Many symptoms of COVID-19 overlap with symptoms of less severe illnesses that require significantly less time away from school (CDC, 2020a). Although the CDC does not recommend daily physical screening of all students, the most recent guidance from the CDC supports screening testing as an additional layer of mitigation to identify and isolate cases of COVID-19. This testing should be voluntary, and consent from the parent or legal guardian is required for children of minor age (CDC, 2021a). The CDC recommends prioritizing high school students over middle school students, and middle school students over elementary students, for screening testing. Furthermore, screening testing is recommended at expanded levels for schools where there the rate of community transmission is high, and lower levels where community transmission is at lower rates (CDC, 2021a). Additionally, the new CDC guidance highlights the importance of testing for “populations experiencing a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 cases or severe disease” which includes racial and ethnic groups that have experienced disproportionate rates of infection in relation to population size (CDC, 2020c, para. 16).

Most recent guidance from the CDC recommends that students and teachers receive diagnostic testing if they exhibit any of the symptoms associated with COVID-19 which include: 1) a temperature of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher; 2) a sore throat; 3) cough or increased cough for those who have a chronic cough; 4) difficulty breathing, or increased difficulty for those with chronic breathing issues; 5) diarrhea or vomiting; 6) a new loss of taste or smell; and 7) new severe headache, especially accompanied by fever. A 10-day quarantine is recommended for those who test positive. In addition, to return to school, 24 hours should have passed with the resolution of fever without medication and other symptoms have improved (CDC, 2021a).

While a 14-day quarantine is recommended by the CDC, the quarantine can be shortened to either 10 days (without testing and no symptoms from daily monitoring) or 7 days (with testing and no symptoms reported from daily monitoring), depending on the resources available (CDC, 2020e). Illinois uses the same consequences for symptomatic cases as positive cases, specifying students should stay home for at least ten days from the start of symptoms (ISBE et al., 2020). Similarly, symptomatic students in Kansas are to stay home for a minimum of ten days (KSDE, 2020). Michigan advises students to stay home until a negative test result is obtained, or they are fully recovered according to CDC guidelines (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). While no state guidelines within this summary require negative test results to attend and/or return to school, it would be remiss not to note the existence of testing disparities. White communities have more testing sites per person than Black communities (McMinn et al., 2020). Further, 64% of rural counties do not have a testing site, although this number likely to grow as testing sites grow throughout the country (Surgo Foundation, 2020).

Screening Testing for COVID-19 and Quarantine Recommendations

Previous CDC guidance recommended testing only when there was exposure to a



[Image description: Black, feminine-presenting student in a mask, standing outside next to a fence on a school campus.]

person with confirmed COVID-19, when the student traveled to or lived in an area where the local, tribal, or state health department is reporting large numbers of cases, or where the student lives in an area of high community transmission. The student would then be referred to a healthcare provider or testing site. Local health officials are then to determine whether viral testing is appropriate (CDC, 2020a). However, most recent guidance issued by the CDC in February 2021 recommends weekly testing of teachers and staff no matter the level of community transmission. Weekly testing of students is recommended in communities with moderate to high levels of transmission (CDC, 2021a). Ohio explicitly refers all students with symptoms to a healthcare provider or testing site (ODE & Ohio Department of Health [ODH], 2020). Missouri encourages consultation with a provider if symptoms develop at home, and Iowa defers to providers if there are individual concerns (Iowa Department of Education, 2020a; MDHSS & MDESE, 2020).

If illness develops at school, students should be isolated and sent home or sent to a healthcare facility, depending on the severity of symptoms (CDC, 2020a). State guidelines recommend isolation in the event symptoms appear in school (ISBE et al., 2020; MDHSS & MDESE, 2020; ODE, 2020), but processes to deter stigmatization should also be considered. Because COVID-19 is associated with Wuhan, China, there has been increased mistreatment of Asian people in the U.S. Discrimination claims against people of Asian descent increased in New York City, affecting housing, employment, and hospitality. Further, Roberto et al. (2020) argue that the increasing rate of asymptomatic cases may foster infection identification based on race rather than symptoms, inferring that students may be targeted with detrimental COVID-19 school policies on the same basis. In the case that a student is legitimately ill, they may not seek medical treatment in fear of discrimination, exacerbating unnecessary learning loss if choosing to stay home, or inducing the spread of sickness if attendance continues (Bruns et al., 2020). When isolating ill students, state guidance recommends dedicated rooms (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE et al., 2020; NDE, 2020; ODE, 2020), but stigmatization should be considered in choosing a room that is discrete and promotes privacy.

Social Distancing, Face Masks, and Classroom Set Up

The CDC provides general guidance on social distancing, face-coverings, and classroom environments for districts and schools across the nation. The five key mitigation strategies recommended by the CDC are: 1) universal and correct use of masks; 2) physical distancing; 3) hand washing and respiratory etiquette; 4) cleaning; and 5) contact-tracing (CDC, 2021a). Additionally, the CDC recommends that local, state, and tribal officials consider prioritizing teachers for early vaccine distribution, but that access to vaccines should not be a condition for reopening schools for in-person instruction. Even as vaccinations are distributed amongst teachers, the mitigation strategies listed above will remain essential to reduce the spread of the virus for some time (CDC, 2021a). The CDC recently issued new guidance that three feet of social distancing is appropriate if masks are universal, regardless of the rate of community spread (CDC, 2021b). A recent study published in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* found that infection rates were not higher in Massachusetts schools that required at least three feet distancing compared to those that implemented six feet social distancing. The majority of districts involved required universal masking in both groups (van de Berg, et al., 2021). The new recommendation is consistent with the World Health Organization's (WHO) school guidance that where there is community transmission of COVID-19, at least 1 meter (3.28 feet) of social distance should be maintained (Wamsly, 2021).

States are encouraged to follow the CDC guidelines, but have the autonomy to provide specific local reopening guidelines to their school districts. Many states in the Midwest and Plains region share commonalities in their reopening plans concerning social distancing, face masks, and classroom setup. Regarding social distancing, the creation of cohorts or pods within the school is encouraged to limit

[Image description: Feminine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color and masculine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color, wearing masks, receiving hand sanitizer from teacher. In the background a masculine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color is visible waiting in line.]

contact (ISBE et al., 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a; KSDE, 2020). The cohorts or pods operate on a hybrid schedule with groups alternating online and in-person instruction days. The Iowa Department of Education (2020a) mentions six feet of distance is not always guaranteed—but as much distance as possible in each situation will be implemented. NDE (2020) provides specific guidelines on the number of

students in each small group (no more than 20) to ensure there is enough distance between students. Most states in the Midwest and Plains region recommend the use of face masks for children in grades three and higher (ISBE & IDPH, 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a; KSDE, 2020). However, Kansas and Michigan both require the use of face masks for children and students when indoors, unless wearing a face mask is detrimental to the health of the person (KSDE, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020).

The new CDC guidelines provide a quick guide on setting up classrooms called How do I set up my classroom? Fifteen recommendations are given for maintaining safe classrooms, as well as five examples of possible classroom arrangements with social distancing. Recommendations include that desks remain six feet apart, turning desks in the same direction so that students are not facing each other, or having students sit on the same side of tables. Other recommendations include setting up at least one handwashing station or using hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol when soap and water are not available, limiting the use of shared objects, and marking X's on tables to keep students from sitting less than six feet apart (X's mark where students should not sit). Additionally, walking paths to maintain social distancing should be marked on the floor and doors, and when possible, windows should be open to allow air circulation (CDC, 2021a).

The guidelines for classroom setup for states in accordance with CDC guidelines vary across the states. Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan recommend classrooms arrange desks to face the same direction while also maintaining adequate spacing (ISBE et al., 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Many of the states also mention providing barriers or partitions whenever six feet of distance cannot be maintained (ISBE et al., 2020; Iowa Department of Education, 2020a; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; KSDE, 2020; MDHSS & MDESE, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; NDE, 2020; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction [NDDPI], 2020; OSDE, 2020; SDDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Indiana guidelines recommend elementary school classrooms may operate with three feet of physical space between students while contagion spread numbers remain low (Indiana Department of Education, 2020).

Implementing Safe and Equitable Practices in the School Environment

Schools are struggling to provide fair and equal treatment for their students, staff, teachers, and administrators in practices concerning social distancing, face mask considerations, and creating inclusive classroom environments. Regarding social distancing, teachers face complex decisions of how to maintain six feet of distance while providing students with engaging lessons. Many classrooms have partitions or barriers which limit the child's view of their teacher. Desks are arranged to limit interaction, and thus, this arrangement also limits the curriculum designed with small group and partner work in mind.

Discipline presents new challenges in online and in-person environments. In a sub-section entitled, “Emergency Safety Intervention” in the discipline section of KSDE’s plan, restraint of students is discussed, although it is not clear under what context restraint might occur: “Restraint, as always, should be a very last resort. If a restraint is deemed necessary, consider a restraint that does not put the student and adult(s) face-to-face to limit exposure. Adults should wear a mask, as appropriate, and as they are able to” (KSDE, 2020, p. 1055). It is disturbing to imagine a context where restraining students is appropriate beyond an immediate safety issue where the student presents a threat of bodily harm to others or themselves. Without providing more context around this statement, it could be used out of context.

Implementing strict social distancing requirements makes the need for creative uses of the design and function of a school even more important. If space is limited, schools should consider seeking community organizations to help provide creative solutions and resources. For example, an Indiana district is using the YMCA to house students on remote learning days while the other half of its students are in-person and vice versa (Hodges, 2020). Typically, urban schools have school buildings in densely populated areas; this allows for fewer usable outdoor spaces, which makes it difficult to provide the recommended space between students. Most schools are filled to their capacity, therefore empty “extra” rooms are not an option. These are added challenges schools face with social distancing.

Finally, the health risks for teachers, students, staff, and the administration are potentially greater for schools that do not require face coverings. Cohorting or pods of students may limit interactions within the school day, but what is preventing students, teachers, staff, and administration from maintaining social distancing protocols when they are away from schools? Does this potentially create more risk for other students, teachers, staff, and administrators? Ultimately school administrators, both district and building leaders, have difficult choices to make—and those choices impact the health and safety of everyone in the community. Reopening plans should continually be reevaluated as state and district leaders assess the level of infection in the community and in schools over time.

Working closely with and creating multiple methods of communications with parents and support staff is recommend by most states.

Special Considerations for Students with Dis/abilities and for Emergent Multilingual Learners

All state guidelines, at a minimum, emphasize meeting Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements when school instruction is provided by a district or school (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020; KSDE, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; NDE, 2020; ODE, 2020; SDDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Many states highlight documenting services met through the IEP, considering compensatory services or additional services of some type, as well making sure to complete any backlogged IEP meetings (Indiana Department of Education, 2020;

MDHSS & MDESE, 2020; OSDE, 2020; NDE, 2020; OSDE, 2020; ODE, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; KSDE 2020; SDDE, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; WDPI, 2020a; Iowa Department of Education 2020c). For instance, the Minnesota Department of Education (2020) emphasizes meeting IDEA requirements through monitoring, evaluation, and reevaluation of the IEP, and with all three learning approaches (i.e., in-person, hybrid, and distance learning). Either directly or implicitly these plans discuss accommodating individual students' needs for differentiated learning (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020; KSDE, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; NDE, 2020; ODE, 2020; SDDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). For instance, the NDDPI discusses how districts must ensure IEP meetings, evaluations, and referrals are implemented in a timely manner, and consider how data can be used to inform instructional practices around "recoupment of unfinished learning during the distance learning period for students with disabilities" (NDDPI, 2020, p. 12). Both the Iowa Department of Education and the ISBE focus on continuing to meet federal guidelines to ensure access to a free public education that addresses students' individual needs. The plan recommends reviewing the IEPs for possible amendment given students' performance.

Federal guidance for students with dis/abilities states that if schools are completely closed due to the pandemic, then schools are not required to provide services to students with dis/abilities (Belsha, 2020). However, once reopened, teams that work with students with dis/abilities will need to determine how to make up for the missed services and meet the students' needs. If districts close schools, but provide instruction remotely, they are charged with making sure all students have equal access to a public education (Belsha, 2020). Working closely and creating multiple methods of communications with parents and support staff was recommended by most states (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; SDDE, 2020; ODE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Collaboration between general education, special education, and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers is recommended to meet the needs of students with IEPs, Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP), and 504s (Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; ODE, 2020). Assistive technology should be provided when possible (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). Plans are to be revised based on parent feedback and assessment data (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). The ISBE recommends collaboration with paraprofessionals for "Blended Remote Learning Days," or days when both in-person and remote learning is provided, as well as transitioning from remote learning (ISBE, 2020, p.1).

Ensuring Equitable Access to Education for All Students

The NDDPI (2020) guidelines provide a section in their plan on consideration for special populations that recommends schools and districts consider how alternative schedules, extended periods of remote learning, and intermittent school closure may impact service delivery for

students receiving special education services. Meaningful access to general education and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is emphasized. Some questions to think about when supporting emergent multilingual learners are: 1) Are you considering hiring bilingual aides to support students and families? 2) Are you using assessment data to create individual plans

[Image description: Masculine-presenting, middle school-aged student of Color with a disability, sitting in a wheelchair in school hallway on the right. In the distance, on the opposite side of the hall, the back of another student moving in a wheel chair is shown.]

to mitigate learning loss? and 3) Is there collaboration with ESL teachers and content area teachers? (ODE, 2020). The Iowa Department of Education recommends thinking about how "cultural liaisons" might provide a range of supports for multilingual learners, including "interpretation and translation, advising, and cultural navigation with staff and families" as well as distance learning in multiple languages (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c, p. 39).

Several plans emphasize finding an appropriate online service/platform to facilitate virtual meetings and allow document access (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; ODE, 2020) as well as making sure students have the requisite technology, both assistive and otherwise, for online learning (KSDE, 2020; ODE, 2020) and access to the internet (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c). The Iowa Department of Education advises thinking about how assistive technologies and other supports will be physically provided to families. The Iowa Department of Education (2020a) also recommends thinking about service delivery methods where access to technology is limited (e.g., phone) and ways to stay in communication if participants are not available. The NDE (2020) recommends regular cleaning of assistive technology for in-person instruction, such as secondary laptops displaying captions and personal devices, as well as microphones and other shared devices.

Although there is a tendency to assume that more liberal or blue states prioritize online learning over in-person instruction, the reality is that the issue of reopening schools is complex and can be viewed in multiple ways from a perspective of equity. According to Faden et al. (2020) students with dis/abilities benefit greatly from services provided in-person, such as mental health support and occupational, physical, and speech therapy to students with dis/abilities development. Another consideration is the difficulty of parents to replicate this instruction in the home, as well as possible barriers of moving in and out of the school setting because of mobility issues. Finally, they suggest that in-school social distancing

may be difficult for those who have physical or behavior “challenges” (Faden et al., 2020, p. 8). In regard to multilingual learners, Faden et al. (2020) suggests that online education platforms may not support emergent multilingual learners specifically, and that home resources used by families may not be available in different languages. The authors also point to the likelihood that emergent multilingual learners may be living in poverty, have limited access to technology, the internet, food, and health resources, and may experience increased learning loss. The ISBE suggests that schools consider employed students in planning schedules for school attendance as more older students may need to work to support their families. ISBE also suggests prioritizing in-person instruction for students under 13 who may not have “childcare or supports at home or with other agencies” (ISBE et al., 2020, p. 16).

As discussed in Faden et al. (2020), students with dis/abilities may benefit greatly from in-person instruction as well as be able to access other essential services in the school setting. ISBE recommends that in-person instruction be prioritized for emergent multilingual learners to facilitate language development as a social process. But as discussed by the Minnesota Department of Education (2020), students with dis/abilities may encounter multiple service providers during their school day and this may increase exposure risk. Some services may be prioritized or provided virtually to mitigate risk.

Mask Adaptations for Inclusive Education

Clear face shields, coverings with clear windows, or pre-recorded instruction are recommended to facilitate language instruction. Many states recommend face shields or masks with a clear window to facilitate instruction for students with dis/abilities, as well as for students learning a language (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; NDE, 2020; SDDE, 2020). Clear masks allow for communication with students. The CDC (2020a) also emphasizes clear masks to accommodate those who are deaf or hard of hearing. If a clear mask is not available,

[Image description: Feminine-presenting, middle school-aged student of Color sitting, with their arm resting on a stack of books.]

written communication, closed captioning, and reducing background noise are alternatives. Seeing words enunciated contributes to language learning, as well as promoting communication for in-person instruction. The SDDE (2020) highlights how wearing cloth masks that fit around the ears or head can be difficult for those who use hearing devices, eye protection, helmets, head/neck supports, etc. Similarly, the Minnesota Department of Education (2020), discusses how masks with straps

for the ears may not work well for some students that have hearing devices. The Indiana Department of Education (2020) provides links to sites where the masks can be procured, as well as a do-it-yourself guide. Links to accessories for those wearing hearing aids/cochlear implants are also provided.

Other common themes were around considering how social distancing would be communicated to students with dis/abilities (CDC, 2020a; NDDPI, 2020; SDDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). For instance, the SDDE (2020) provides recommendations for differentiated instruction around social distancing to ensure that students with dis/abilities understand the importance of social distancing. These include placing tape on the floor as a visual reminder of personal space, reading or providing social stories and videos about the importance of social distancing, gestures, daily announcements, break downs of steps and feedback, and reinforcement.

Another theme was to consider how students with dis/abilities may need accommodation for social distancing and mask-wearing. “People with intellectual and developmental dis/abilities, mental health conditions or other sensory sensitivities” may have difficulty wearing a mask (CDC, 2020a). These individuals should consult with a healthcare provider about wearing a mask. At the school level, it is advised to plan to accommodate students for whom PPE, social distancing, and hygiene techniques may not be feasible (WDPI, 2020a). According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2020), some students may not be able to tolerate wearing a face mask because of tactile selectivity. The Minnesota Department of Education (2020) discusses how some students may also require physical touch to support their communication and access, and therefore may need accommodation**.** The ISBE (2020) discusses how it is important to consider how the student will access interpreting and captioning services during instruction.

Consider Additional Supports for Students to Promote Equitable Access

According to the ODE (2020), the needs of the most vulnerable students and staff should be prioritized when making school reopening decisions. To ensure equitable academic and social-emotional supports, considerations for students with dis/abilities, those with underlying health conditions, students from disinvested communities, emergent multilingual learners, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and students involved in the justice system must be considered (ODE, 2020). Addressing the whole child is centered in the ISBE (2020) plan where Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is referred to such that,

> It is important that educators seek to meet Multilingual Learners’ essential needs prior to asking them to engage in instructional activities. These essential needs include physical safety, nutrition, and emotional care. Educators should work with their school leaders to ensure that students are physically and emotionally able to engage in the designed learning activities prior to assigning them to students. (p. 36).

State departments recommend that medically fragile students receive remote instruction (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; SDDE, 2020; ISBE et al., 2020). The

ISBE (2020) advises that while in-person instruction is preferable for students with IEPs, emergent multilingual learners, and students under the age of 13, virtual instruction should be prioritized for medically fragile students. Dedicated nurses should be available to consult with students with health conditions that will attend in-person to make sure treatment for conditions is available as needed.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Instruction and Universal Design for Learning

A few states discussed asset-based approaches to language acquisition, as well as multi-tiered supports for students with dis/abilities. When thinking about meeting the needs of students with dis/abilities and multilingual learners, it is important to note that approaches that are culturally sustaining, responsive, and draw upon Universal Design for Learning (UDL), work well for all students by promoting an inclusive education that can "address educational inequities at the intersections of ability, race, language, gender and class differences, particularly in an inclusive education" (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016, p. 367). Similarly, varying the mode of content delivery (e.g., email, lecture, group projects, peer dialogue, modules, and independent learning, etc.) is responsive to the way different students work and learn (Jackson et al., 2020). The KSDE recommends an approach based on the Kansas Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Alignment, providing tiered instruction for all students including students with dis/abilities (2020). The Iowa Department of Education (2020a) and NDE (2020) also recommend MTSS. They list common accommodations including insuring access through systems such as text to speech/digital text (e.g., Kansas InfiniTEXT), varying modalities of instruction (auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, etc.), and focusing on key information in instruction. Additionally, the KSDE recommends competency-based instruction that focuses on knowledge gained, rather than time spent in the classroom (2020). Some states recommend the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) framework for language instruction support (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Some states promoted UDL (ISBE, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; NDE, 2020) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Iowa Department of Education, 2020a; NDE, 2020). The KSDE (2020) specifically mentions thinking about accommodations for non-verbal students with dis/abilities, such that they can fully engage in learning experiences in a safe learning environment.

> Bullying is not exclusive to the physical setting of schools as cyberbullying has been a significant concern in the pandemic as well as the pre-pandemic context.

Identifying platforms for online instruction, and specific strategies around providing instruction in multiple modalities, is a common theme both for multilingual learners and students with dis/abilities (ISBE, 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). The ISBE (2020) emphasized instruction that engages all four language domains (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2020), there should be opportunities to practice oral and written language. Assignments should be short,

clear, and connect to big ideas. Another recommendation is to prioritize work students can complete independently. The ISBE (2020) recommends the use of multi-media resources in students' home language to support home language learning, as well as learning around other topics. Using broad criteria and multiple options for assignments, while having reasonable expectations for prioritizing work that students can complete independently, was emphasized by the Indiana Department of Education. On the other hand, the KSDE recommended detailed levels of performance guidelines for subject/content area for students receiving English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services (2020).

Participation in core content with individualized accommodations, modifications, and supports can support inclusive learning environments. Additionally, accommodations may also include an extension of time for assignments, captioning, or embedded interpretation, as well as translated reading material (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; ISBE et al., 2020). The Iowa Department of Education (2020) recommends considering how multilingual learners can access print materials in students' home language.

States often include links to resources around online teaching, online IEP meetings, best practices for language instruction, teaching students with dis/abilities online, and Spanish language resources (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; NDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). The Minnesota Department of Education (2020) provides guidance on distance learning for emergent multilingual learners and migratory children among other resources. The Minnesota Department of Education also provides guidance specific to working with American Indian Students and migrant students.

A few states highlighted how funds could be accessed to support accommodations for students with dis/abilities. For instance, the OSDE offers a one-time distribution of IDEA funds to support special education recovery based on the October 1st child count. These funds can be used for "professional development, assistive technology, related services, stipends, supplies, contracted services and tutoring" (OSDE, 2020, p. 27). According to WDPI, funding sources for services can be IDEA, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, or local dollars (2020a).

Addressing Access to Technology

As the COVID-19 pandemic moves many aspects of daily life to a virtual context, so does the school day. Faden et al. (2020) outlines disparities related to technology and internet access, most notably the disparate impact of technology barriers on exacerbating the learning loss of students from disinvested communities. Students from disinvested communities are more likely to live in households without a stable internet connection, or operate on limited data plans, significantly affecting synchronous learning and making internet utilization difficult. Additionally, many of these families share devices, limiting each students' time connected to the digital classroom. Research shows that online instruction's effectiveness is dependent upon access to reliable technology and internet, as well as teachers' training in

online instruction (García & Weiss, 2020). Because access to technology mediates students' success in the online learning environment, online education is inequitable when students supply their own devices and internet connection (Wang & Decker, 2014).

Creating Inclusive and Accessible Remote Learning Environments

Even if students have access to technology and a reliable internet connection, many do not have an ideal learning environment. In the 2017-2018 school year, there were over 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness in the United States (National Center for Homeless Education, 2020). These students live in homeless shelters, motels, cars, with other families, and other precarious situations. The emotional toll of the pandemic is compounded for students experiencing homelessness, as they are expected to learn in unstable environments. Further, most online education platforms are not adapted to multilingual learners, who make up 17.3% of the unhoused student population, exponentially increasing their learning loss (National Center for Homeless Education, 2020). Students with dis/abilities also face barriers, as the online learning context can inhibit their use of adaptive technologies.

In an analysis of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin guidelines for reopening schools, many of the aforementioned concerns are identified. At various levels of specificity, states acknowledge the probable inequities in access to technology and internet. Although there are diversions in the specificities of solutions and considerations, OSDE proposes the most pragmatic solution for districts: permission to allocate federal funds to technology expenses (OSDE, 2020). Indiana relies on pre-existing technology plans at the district level. These plans imply solutions for student access to technology and internet exist, as expansion of these accessibility programs is considered. Many states mention the use of take-home devices (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Iowa Department of Education, 2020d; ISBE, 2020), but it is unclear if the capacity to do so exists—and how to move forward if not. Iowa suggests private partnerships to increase internet access, and utilization of busses as Wi-Fi hotspots (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d). Other states impress the importance of student access to technology, but solutions are unclear (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE, 2020; KSDE, 2020).

When technology is utilized, states often suggest a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Effective synchronous education relies on high-speed internet. Research shows a relationship between internet speed and home value, where higher home values receive faster internet service (Molnar et al., 2019). Rural communities also experience lower quality internet (Riddlesden & Singleton, 2014). Crucial reliance on synchronous learning disadvantages students from disinvested communities and rural areas.

In using technology, most states recommend it to be developmentally appropriate, planning technology use around the student's ability to work and navigate technology independently (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d; ISBE,

2020). Additionally, it is advised to provide simple tutorials in languages appropriate for specific district communities. Iowa encourages districts to create infrastructure to support students and families in troubleshooting technology. This support can also encompass curriculum support for students, acting as a "homework hotline" (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d).

Remote Learning as An Accessible Alternative

In scenarios where technology use is not possible, alternatives should be offered. To assess the needs of district communities, Illinois encourages a survey of students and families on the availability of technology, learning space, and connectivity. If the survey reveals barriers to a fully digital learning environment, school districts are to then provide meaningful alternatives (ISBE, 2020).

Asynchronous alternatives range from analog to digital. Analog alternatives use take-home paper packets, books, writing utensils, and other such resources, suggesting multiple adaptations of assignments based on availability of technology (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; ISBE, 2020). The Iowa Department of Education's guidance briefly mentions the accessibility of analog alternatives a found in Iowa's guidance (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c).

Digital adaptations include the use of flash drives to connect students to curriculum offline, pre-recorded lectures, and independent work (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d; ISBE, 2020). Kansas's guidelines take a unique approach to technology access, reforming the standard curriculum into a competency-based program. Because of this, many example lessons are presented and adapted for in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning. Most all hybrid and virtual learning adaptations require technology and internet access (KSDE, 2020). In addition, it is important to consider that many families may not be comfortable with Zoom meetings that may be seen as invasive of their privacy. Providing backgrounds for meetings, and guidance around using these backgrounds during meetings, may mitigate this issue.

[Image description: Black, feminine-presenting elementary school-aged student of Color, looking onto a computer screen, while holding a notebook on top of their head, frustrated.]

Assistive technologies in a remote learning environment are largely overlooked. At minimum, it is mentioned as a variable to be considered by districts (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d). Indiana is bound by state law to review IEPs every 60 days for virtual students (Indiana Department of Education, 2020). Specifications on implementation is not explicit. District guidance should be clear about the ways accessibility can be achieved for students with dis/abilities, such

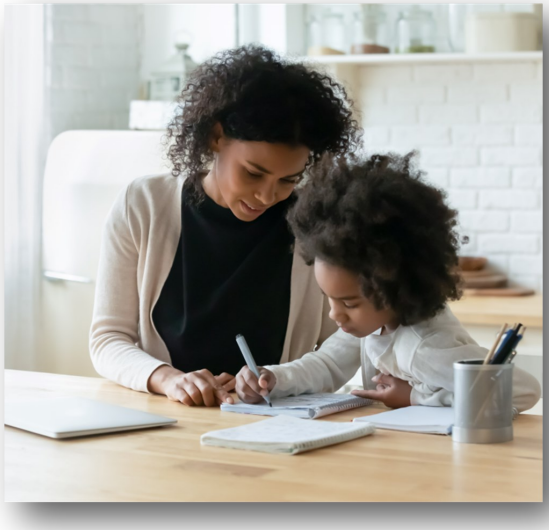
as the use of photo tags to accommodate text reading technology, and the strategic visual design of course webpages for non-traditional screen navigation (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007).

Districts are encouraged to consider the home learning environment of the student, and implement support to create space for learning in the home. Iowa asks districts to consider if students have a “desk or quiet space,” and “how will they be provided” (Iowa Department of Education, 2020d)? Strategic and creative use of community partnerships and federal dollars can be leveraged, but states do not offer tangible ideas. Finding solutions to this issue is critical, as poverty disparately impacts students of other marginalized identities.

The social and emotional health of students should be considered in various contexts. In regard to technology, it is important that schools are mindful of the emotions that can occur due to lack of internet access. For instance, Wisconsin guidelines encourage schools to “address social-emotional needs in digital environments, as well as navigating the stress and challenges of not having internet access” (WDPI, 2020b, para. 2). Additionally, virtual learning brings teachers and peers into the intimacies of a student’s home, highlighting socio-economic status. While students are resilient, the emotional weight fostered by the pervasive use of technology in the school system must be carefully considered, accommodating the needs of students to create more inclusive learning environments.

Opportunities and Challenges in Online Learning

There are both benefits and challenges of virtual schooling. In reading the following section, and discussing both benefits and challenges of the online learning environment, it is important to recollect the vital role of schools in communities. As discussed throughout this paper, schools can be a source of mental health, medical, dis/ability services, food, socialization, and safety. Many of these services cannot be replicated online. However, schools are also a source of bullying, anxiety, and rigid, traditional expectations.



[Image description: Black, feminine-presenting parent/caregiver touching notebook, as feminine-presenting, elementary school-aged student of Color writes in notebook.]

Systemic Racism and Inequity in the Learning Environment

Many students may feel safer outside of the traditional school setting for a number of reasons. Disinvested or low-income communities are particularly affected by poor quality infrastructure and low investment in school systems. The

contemporary financialization of public infrastructure increases the impact of past racist policies like redlining, as there is a capitalistic cycle of infrastructure spending and local incomes (Cochrane et al., 2017). Because of financialization, white flight contributes to destabilizing neighborhoods, and the siphoning away of public investment (Solari, 2012). The exclusive system of affluent neighborhoods fosters scarcity of resources. By leveraging economic and social capital, affluent communities are afforded maintained streets, safety, and other public goods (Solari, 2012).

Concerns of safety, access, and the experience of exclusionary discipline practices are reflected in a United Negro College Fund (UNCF) report summarizing survey data from a 2013 national survey of 797 Black students on their perceptions of K -12 education: “Only 43 percent of African American youth surveyed felt their school campus was safe” (Anderson, 2018, p. 14). Many Black youths had experienced exclusionary discipline in their schools. Thirty-seven percent of Black students reported experiencing in-school suspension, 36% of Black students experienced out-of-school suspensions, and 8% of Black students reported being expelled from school. Of commuting concerns, 75% was attributed to infrastructure which was not conducive to students’ commutes. Included in this were poorly maintained streets, unsafe transportation, bike infrastructure safety, and poor lighting (Anderson, 2018). Much of Black students’ experiences in commuting to school can be explained by the disinvestment in neighborhood infrastructure as a result of historic government-sponsored segregation (Diem & Walters, 2019; Greene & Gourevitch, 2017).

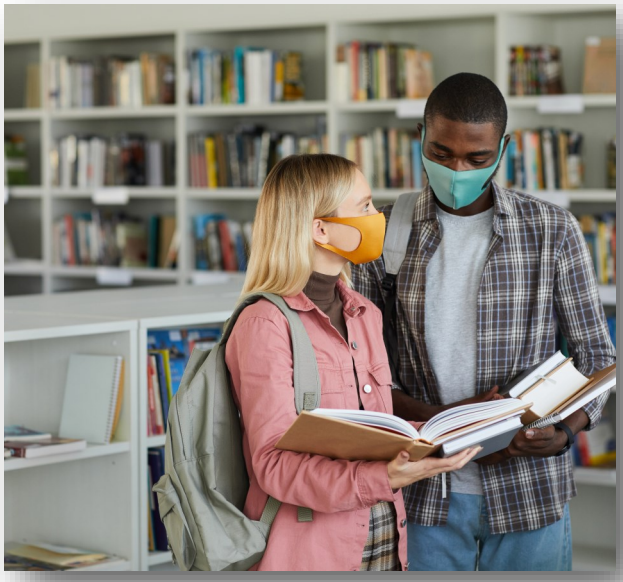
Commuting safety can impact absenteeism. As discussed by Anderson (2018),

> Low-income, minority communities are often more likely to be concentrated in areas plagued with environmental hazards, including dilapidated buildings, toxic air and water and poorly maintained streets. Such climates can have a negative impact on overall health and youth performance. The repeated exposure to such environments can influence school attendance and engagement. (p.14).

A study on Baltimore City Public Schools found that students whose walking routes have higher crime rates are at increased risk for absenteeism, leading to lower academic achievement (Burdick-Will et al., 2019). Virtual learning removes barriers in accessing the classroom, as students do not have to choose between school and safety. At the same time, when students are not attending school in-person, inequities in access are often exacerbated by limited access to technology, resources, and supports from teachers in a virtual learning environment. For instance, a recent NWEA examination of school testing data in mathematics from 2019 to 2020 found that on average, students who attended school virtually scored 5 to 10 percent lower in math—and that students in grades three, four, and five were most affected. Additionally, these findings may underestimate the loss in learning due to the pandemic for students from disinvested communities and Students of Color, because these students make up the one in four students that tested in 2019, but did not take the test in 2020 (Thompson, 2020).

Schools as Sources of Bully and Disproportionality in Discipline

Many marginalized students feel both physically and mentally unsafe in the school environment (Toomey et al., 2018). Black students are disproportionately targeted for school discipline, Black girls have been reprimanded for wearing hair extensions that violate school dress codes, and school curricula and materials often minimize the impact of slavery and Jim



[Image description: Masculine-presenting Black high school student and feminine-presenting high school student of Color, standing in a library looking at an open book.]

Crow policies (Miller, 2021). A school climate survey by the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that students feel unsafe because of their appearance, sexual orientation, and race (Greytak et al., 2016). In the context of sexual orientation, schools were associated with more negative aspects than positive. To illustrate, students report experiencing and witnessing physical violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Queer/ Questioning, and other gender identities and sexual orientations (LGBTQ+) students (Higa et al., 2014). Increased absenteeism and discipline, and decreased academic achievement, are associated with students not feeling safe in school (Greytak et al., 2016).

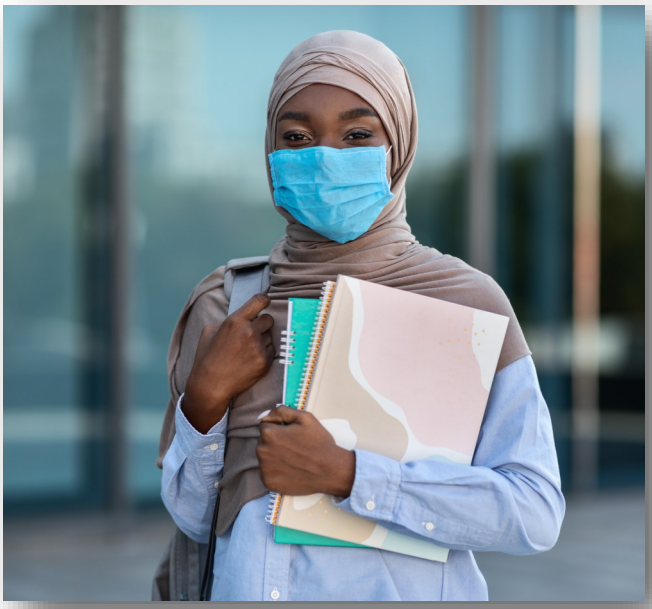
Students who are bullied on a regular basis may feel unsafe in the traditional brick-and-mortar school setting. However, bullying is not exclusive to the physical setting of schools; cyberbullying has been a significant concern in both the pandemic and pre-pandemic context. In the COVID-19 learning environment, it is likely that a caregiver will be observing more academic interactions of their students than when not learning virtually, buffering against bullying in some instances (Wang et al., 2018).

Exclusionary discipline practices removes students from the learning environment. Removal from the learning environment negatively impacts academic achievement; Students of Color and students from dis-invested communities are disproportionately affected by exclusionary policies (Maag, 2012). However, the move to an online learning environment has not eliminated the disproportionality involved in school discipline. Even in the virtual environment, Students of Color continue to be suspended and expelled at higher rates than white students (Coomer et al., 2020). Most troubling is the increased monitoring and surveillance of students as schools attempt to employ rigid rules of the brick-and-mortar environment to students in their own homes (Coomer et al., 2020). Suspending and expelling students for not adhering to policies that allow for no considerations of students' home environment or adaptations fails to respond to the lived context of students.

A survey of caregivers of students with dis/abilities identify “characteristics, design, and layout of built and natural environments” as barriers for their students (Law et al., 2007). This impacts the ability to navigate the school with ease, especially in between classes when many students must move to different classrooms while carrying books (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002). The physical environment of schools is clearly eliminated in a virtual context. Caregivers also mention social barriers for their students, referring to the stigma and discrimination that occurs to students with dis/abilities (Law et al., 2007). The social environment disincentives students with dis/abilities to participate due to feeling “otherized.” Further, traditional teaching styles can implement a pace of learning not optimal for students with dis/abilities, impeding their ability to finish work within a time frame, and with technology suited for non-dis/abled students (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002). While not eliminated, a virtual learning environment can decrease social discrimination, and increase independent learning, allowing students to work at a pace and in a way that is best for them. At the same time, without explicit attention to how discipline practices must be culturally responsive in an online learning environment, disproportionality in discipline will continue—and may even be exacerbated by—the increased attempt to monitor and control students in the online learning environment.

Communication with Parents and Caregivers

This section highlights trends in states’ approach to communication with parents and caregivers, but many plans cover communication across topic areas discussed in the paper. For instance, the importance of communication with parents/caregivers is highlighted in the section discussing



[Image description: Feminine-presenting high school student of Color standing outside holding a folder and notebook.]

approaches to ensuring access for multilingual learners and students with dis/abilities. Guidance on communication with parents and caregivers for administrators from the CDC includes communication on mitigation strategies such as social distancing, cloth face coverings, hand hygiene, and cohorting. According to the CDC, these practices should be communicated and reinforced in developmentally appropriate ways for students and staff.

Parents should also be educated about the importance of monitoring and responding to the symptoms of COVID-19 at home (CDC, 2020a). Communication with parents/caregivers is an essential aspect of state plans, especially because many plans rely on parents and caregivers to screen students for symptoms before they attend

school in-person as recommended by the CDC. Similarly, the *North Dakota K-12 Smart Restart* plan encourages schools to communicate with families around safe practices of hygiene in the home, as well as communication to quickly let parents and staff know of exposure to COVID-19 in the school (NDDPI, 2020). The Iowa Department of Education advises providing adequate information about how to use online platforms, access lessons, submit assignments, and connect with educators, administrators, and support staff for various needs (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c). In addition, the Iowa Department of Education suggests considering the challenges that parents and caregivers face when learning is hybrid or virtual (Iowa Department of Education 2020c).

Because of the role parents and caregivers play in ensuring the safe reopening of schools, many state plans emphasize the educative function of communication with parents and caregivers (Illinois Department of Education, 2020; Indiana Department of Education, 2020; NDE,2020; NDPPI, 2020; WPDI, 2020), while other states emphasize parents and caregivers as a source of information, such that there is an explicit emphasis on two-way communication between parents/caregivers and school officials (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; OSDE, 2020). Two-way communication can contribute to students' academic success, as well as ensuring a stronger social-emotional support system (ISBE, 2020). According to ISBE (2020) and IDPH (2020) parents should be kept up-to-date on what students and families can expect when returning to in-person classes, remote learning policies and changes in policy, and safe health practices at home.

Surveys can be administered to get real-time feedback, and parents and caregivers can be asked to serve on task forces and committees (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020). At a minimum, communication with parents and caregivers should allow for questions (ISBE et al., 2020), solicit feedback on proposed plans (OSDE, 2020), and validate concerns (KSDE, 2020). Michigan ensured a robust group of stakeholder perspectives were included, and intend to incorporate feedback on an on-going basis (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). Collaborative decision-making allows knowledge sharing across multiple areas of expertise, leading to more equitable policy (Christensen & Perry, 2015).

> Schools serving low-income areas should consider measures that would incorporate as much face-to-face learning to address inequitable effects of learning loss.

The KSDE (2020) approaches communication from an asset-based perspective, with acknowledgment of the role identity plays in disparate experiences, arguing that a "successful family/school partnership encompasses the elements of trust, validation, acknowledgment, transparency and a shared responsibility throughout the learning process with a 'student first mindset' through respect and dignity" (p. 188). Parents and caregivers are deeply engaged in their students' learning, and therefore offer important perspectives about learning (ISBE et al., 2020); thus, parents and caregivers offer critical insight into how students are managing learning in the virtual setting (Jackson et al., 2020). They can be essential partners in dealing with

uncertainty and understanding a student's level of learning loss. In addition, not only is it important to seek out and incorporate parent/caregiver input and feedback, but it is also important to seek out students' perspectives to know how they are experiencing policies in reopening schools. As stated by ODE, "[It is important to] amplify student voices, especially those of minorities and other underserved groups. Use student voice to better understand student needs and learning preferences to foster greater success" (ODE, 2020*,* p. 12).

Multimodal and Multilingual, Two-way Communication for Success

There are several examples of different types of communication delivery methods proposed by state plans. Namely, communications should be clear and concise (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; KSDE, 2020; OSDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a), using different modalities (e.g., media, written, live, recorded video, and/or audio) (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c; ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; WPDI, 2020a). Some state plans suggested formats include social media (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, etc.), text message, snail mail, email, robocalls, local television, and newspaper (KSDE, 2020). The Iowa Department of Education suggests creating a "centralized extension number, email, or webpage to address incoming questions or concerns on COVID-19 topics, environmental health, and safety-related issues" (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c, p. 7). Following up initial communications with calls or visits when possible is recommended (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c). Providing several communications in multiple forms may be particularly important for staying in touch with parents and caregivers in marginalized communities where access to reliable internet is not a given. Other methods of connection include virtual and in-person community events, parent camps, neighborhood meetings, popsicles in the park, and game/pie nights (KSDE, 2020). The NDE (2020) recommends using videos about behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19 as ways to communicate with staff and families through school websites, emails, and on social media.

From a perspective of ensuring equitable access, one would want to consider the timing of such events in relation to providing access for all parents and caregivers, as well as implementing appropriate social distancing and food hygiene practices when necessary. According to the OSDE (2020), it is important that districts and schools determine which means of communication were most effective during the summer (text messages, phone calls, online portals, websites, and email alerts), and communications should be clear to eliminate confusion. Similarly, the ISBE et al. (2020) suggests using communication platforms that already exist, and with which stakeholders have familiarity (email, telephone, letter, websites, applications, face-to-face with social distancing). The OSDE (2020) also encourages communication with the health department, and gives suggestions about what to consider in communications (such as modifications to schedules, classes, transportation). Many plans discuss the importance of communicating in multilingual students' home language and providing translated copies of resources (ISBE et al., 2020; Michigan Department of Education,

2020; WDPI, 2020a). To maintain communication lines, office hours should be scheduled in ways that are attuned to family work schedules (e.g., day/night) and allow for multiple modes of access (e.g., phone, virtual, etc.) (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c).

The ISBE and IDPH et al. (ISBE et al. 2020) give specific guidance on what districts should communicate to multilingual families around student support. This guidance includes: reviewing syllabi, digital learning platforms, and deadlines; setting aside a space in the home for learning; encouraging students to get enough sleep; limiting technology; keeping a schedule; and encouraging students to meet teachers' behavior expectations. Such guidance is welcome to support learning in the home—but may put undue onus on families dealing with multiple challenges. This guidance should not be limited to multilingual families and is applicable to all parents and caregivers.

The ISBE and IDPH (2020) suggest making regular wellness check-ins, and establishing some type of process to follow up with parents and caregivers whom the school is unable to contact. Part of the process of maintaining contact with parents and caregivers should be verifying correct contact information and the preferred mode of communication on a regular basis, as economic changes may require families to move and/or change phone services. WDPI goes a step further and suggests using law enforcement to make welfare checks on families with whom the school has lost contact (WPDI, 2020a). However, utilizing law enforcement to make check-ups can exacerbate tensions and create stress for families where communities have experienced negative interactions with law enforcement.

The ISBE (2020) offers a very clear asset-based approach to working with multilingual families, discussing how language practices and cultural understandings are valuable and enriching to education. Thus, guidance is given to encourage and affirm caregivers as educators without creating pressure to replicate the classroom environment in the home. Additionally, home language use is encouraged, as well as time for bonding, conversing, and finding meaning in everyday tasks as part of a learning experience that can be used to support classroom discussion. While these suggestions are helpful for connecting learning to students' lived experiences, they can also be used for instruction in general.

Addressing Learning Loss

Addressing learning loss is a particularly important consideration around reopening schools, given that students with dis/abilities and other marginalized communities may lose access to valuable resources when they are not able to attend in-person instruction (Faden et al., 2020). Some states in the MAP region do not specifically mention learning loss in their reopening plans, while other states do address learning loss in regard to three areas for schools to consider: calendar/time adjustments, assessments, and creating an engaging curriculum.

Flexible Solutions to Accommodate Student Needs

Calendar and time adjustments should be considered to provide students with extra time for instruction. This could be done by

adding instruction on the weekends, at night, or shortening the summer. Another consideration was adjusting the school hours, creating longer days when school is in session (ISBE et al., 2020; OSDE, 2020). Other states suggested learning loss should be addressed through specific assessments that cover certain skills; these skill-based assessments could then be used to structure certain interventions for particular groups of students (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; ISBE et al., 2020). The final option for addressing learning loss was to invest in creating engaging lessons for students, as well as differentiated instruction to better meet the needs of individuals (ISBE et al., 2020; ODE, 2020).

Schools serving low-income areas should consider measures that would incorporate as much face-to-face learning to address inequitable effects of learning loss. Compounded by the lack of resources, disinvested schools are at a greater risk of the negative impacts of remote learning. Learning loss is estimated to be at more than a year for those students from disinvested communities (Faden et al., 2020). Even when supplied temporary internet access and the use of a computer, families and caregivers negotiating multiple responsibilities, in addition to supporting online instruction, as well as the need to share devices in the home, contributes to inequitable educational experiences. This challenging environment is likely to continue to be a source of inequity in the future (Faden et al., 2020).

State and district leaders will face important decisions regarding addressing learning loss, especially for students who are considered low-income or from a disinvested community. Many questions surround this issue such as: 1) What will be the parameters of retaining students? 2) Will the course requirements for graduation change? 3) Who will make these decisions and how? 4) What courses will be required? 5) Will some elective courses not be available? 6) Will this impact every district, or only the districts currently struggling to retain and recruit teachers?

Guidance on Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

A few states in the Midwest and Plains region specifically mention the importance of SEL as a required part of the reopening plans and/or the curriculum. Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana all require SEL to be a part of the curriculum (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; ODE, 2020). The Michigan Department of Education also strongly recommends mental health screening for all students (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). The states do not specify if schools are to use outside SEL programs or their own on-staff professionals, nor how an added SEL program will be funded. ISBE recommends responding to the multiple challenges students may face with “empathy, flexibility, and creativity to help mitigate challenges and maximize learning” (ISBE, 2020, p. 13).

Although SEL is specifically mentioned in reopening plans and represents suggested best practices for educators, it is often an area that is cut first when resources are limited. Many plans are primarily concerned with the physical health of children and suggest various options to limit the virus’s health impact on students. However, in

designing and implementation reopening plans, state and district education leaders should explicitly address the social-emotional impact the coronavirus has on students (Faden et al., 2020).

Guidance on Field Trips and Co-curricular and Extra-curricular Activities

The CDC (2020a) recommends limiting or cancelling participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities where social distancing is not possible. In-person instruction should be prioritized over extra-curricular activities, and some close contact sports should be avoided (CDC, 2021a). Similarly, field trips are discouraged, limited, or eliminated in most states in the Midwest and Plains region (Indiana Department of Education, 2020; Iowa Department of Education 2020a; ISBE et.al, 2020; KSDE, 2020; MDH, 2020b; MDHSS et al., 2020; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; NDDPI, 2020; NDE, 2020; ODE, 2020; OSDE, 2020; SDDE, 2020; WDPI, 2020a). Virtual field trips are specifically encouraged in Oklahoma and Kansas (KSDE, 2020; OSDE, 2020).

Regarding co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, most states encourage social distancing policies to mitigate transmission. The most common considerations are to limit the number of people participating (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; OSDE, 2020), provide enough physical space between participants (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; OSDE, 2020), and increased hygiene or cleaning of the environment (ISBE et al., 2020; KSDE, 2020; Minnesota Department of Education, 2020; OSDE, 2020). A noticeable concern is how states will accommodate extra-curricular activities for students who choose to attend school remotely. Illinois specifically mentions that the same opportunities be made available for remote and in-person students (ISBE et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted many issues to consider when reopening schools in the context of a global pandemic that has exacerbated inequities in schools—and society more generally. Creating more inclusive schooling in environments during COVID-19 is particularly important as school personnel consider their role as district and school leaders. This paper examined state guidance and recommendations for reopening schools concerning the following topics: 1) time spent in face-to-face instruction vs. virtual or hybrid learning environments and any calendar changes; 2) screening and reporting of COVID-19 symptoms and exposure; 3) social distancing, face masks and classroom set up; 4) ensuring more equitable learning for students with dis/abilities and multilingual learners; 5) access to technology; 6) opportunities and challenges in online learning, 7) communication with parent/caregivers; 8) addressing learning loss; 9) guidance on SEL; and 10) guidance on field trips and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. It is imperative that district and school leaders directly address how policies and practices implemented during the pandemic may exacerbate issues of access for

marginalized students. By implementing policies designed to improve access and foster more inclusive learning environments, district and school leaders can ensure improved outcomes for all students.

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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