

# Statewide Committee to Safely Reopen Florida's Public Schools

Priorities and Recommendations



STATEWIDE COMMITTEE TO SAFELY  
REOPEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

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Friday, March 13, 2020, was a historic day for Floridians. It was on that afternoon when on a conference call with school district superintendents around the state that Gov. Ron DeSantis made his strong recommendation for an “extended Spring Break” for all of Florida’s school districts. Soon enough the extended break turned into distance-learning for the remainder of the school year.

Florida was touted as a national model of success for the way its students, parents, educators and entire communities came together and over the course of just a week completely transformed how teachers taught and how students learned. Educators should rightfully be praised for the work they did to ensure that instruction continued and that students’ basic needs including meals – continued to be met while school campuses were closed.

However, in the rapid change to distance learning, we must also be cognizant of those who despite all the best efforts fell through the cracks. Students who were already homeless, students without consistent and reliable Internet access or devices to access the Internet were impacted especially hard during this transition. So were students who are English language learners and students with intellectual and/or physical disabilities.

As Florida’s public schools look at reopening, we have a significant advantage that we did not have when they were closed: Time. We must use the time between now and the Fall to create plans which ensure not only that reopening be safe but that recognize the closing of school campuses had a disparate impact on Florida’s neediest students. We further recognize that students of color are more likely to attend schools that are underfunded, schools with less experienced teachers and schools with less rigorous course offerings. Any plan to reopen schools that seeks a return to normal falls short. Almost seventy years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, far too many students of color still attend separate and unequal schools. Therefore, a focus on equity is essential in any reopening plan. Another essential component of any plan to reopen is to be sure it includes the voices, feedback and perspective of all members of the school community.

It was with a lens towards ensuring equity and providing a place for diverse voices to be heard that the Florida Education Association convened its Reopening Schools Task Force. This group of 24 people with decades of public service represents Florida’s diversity as well the public education workforce.

There are over 4,000 public schools in Florida. The largest school, Cypress Bay High School in Broward County, has an average daily attendance of over 4,500 students. That one school has almost four times the entire student population of Franklin County. Given information like this, it did not make sense for this committee to delve into the minutia of school reopening. What works for Franklin County Schools will necessarily look different from what works at Cypress Bay. Instead, our intent is to lay a framework – a set of expectations that each school district and each school incorporate into their own plan.

It is our hope that school districts around the state will make productive use of the summer and convene stakeholder groups of their own to focus on the specific needs for their schools and communities and that this framework can serve as a guide for such discussions.

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Hannah Ard	Middle/high school science teacher
Rep. Kamia Brown	Florida House of Representatives, District 45
Pat Barber	Manatee Education Association President
Andrew Burk	Teacher
Carol Cleaver**	Teacher
Sen. Janet Cruz	Florida Senate, District 18
Al Culp**	Science teacher
Angie Gallo	Orange County School Board member
Carole Gauronskas	FEA Secretary/Treasurer
Rev. James T. Golden	Pastors for Florida's Children
Fedrick Ingram*	FEA President
Linda Kearschner	Florida PTA President
Johanna Lopez	Executive Director of Voces Unidas
Dr. Suzanne Minor**	MD, FAAFP
Adora Obi Nweze	NAACP State President
Curtis Richardson	Tallahassee City Commissioner
David Richardson**	Miami Beach City Commissioner
Quinetta Ryal**	School counselor
Pura Scott	Parent
Andrew Spar	FEA Vice President
Liz Snowden	Small business owner
Liliana Vera	Parent
Sheila Watson	Prekindergarten teacher
Jairus Williams	FAMU student and Student FEA President
Rosanne Wood	Leon County School Board member

\*Chair of the Committee

\*\*Subcommittee Chair

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Any plan to reopen schools must be comprehensive enough to consider the needs of all education stakeholders while simultaneously being responsive to the needs of each of Florida's 67 counties which have all been impacted differently by COVID-19 and are experiencing vastly different levels of community spread.

To best accomplish those goals, our recommendations are broken down into five (5) categories. What follows is a brief description of each category, then specific recommendations by category as determined by the respective workgroups of the Reopening Schools Committee:

### Public Health & Safety

Surveys conducted by the National Education Association, the Florida Department of Education, many school districts around the state, as well as FEA's own surveys make it clear that in order for parents and students to feel comfortable returning to school there must be plans in place that have been developed in accordance with local, state and national health professionals.

It is important to both implement practices that ensure the health and safety of students, faculty and staff as well as being prepared to act swiftly if/when an occurrence of COVID-19 is detected to prevent the school from serving as a vehicle for community spread. Furthermore, there are certain necessary prerequisites which must be met before reopening should be considered. The recommendations below assume the following has already occurred:

- A plan for transporting students safely that accounts for social distancing on buses.
- Downward trend of new cases for 14 days in community.
- Widespread, accurate testing and contact tracing.
- No-touch hand sanitizer outside and inside each classroom and outside all bathrooms so students can clean their hands before entering and upon exiting.
  - The state must make sure sufficient supplies (i.e. soap, hand sanitizer, PPE) are available for all schools on an ongoing basis. This cannot be community generated and must be uniform across the entire state. In addition to having sufficient levels of equipment and supplies, there must be sufficient training for students and staff on how to use them safely and properly. Training must also include specifics on handwashing.

## Priorities and Recommendations:

- ❖ Fair, clear and consistent expectations across districts, particularly on physical distancing and health and safety measures.
  - Provide school leaders with clear guidance to establish procedures if students or staff become unwell. Guidance should include monitoring student and staff health, maintaining regular contact with local health authorities and updating emergency plans and contact lists.
  - Best recommendations are for students not to move and for teachers to move. Teachers would need to clean their new workspace and continue to observe hygiene recommendations including avoiding touching one's face.
  - Risk mitigation must be an essential guiding principle in a safe return to schools with a focus to bring back students, teachers and staff while maintaining physical distancing measures to prevent community transmission.
  - Classrooms and workspaces must be reconfigured to ensure physical distancing.
  - Positions critical to ongoing operations should be prioritized according to the following criteria:
    - Campus safety
    - Preparing for further reopening of the school
    - Work that cannot be effectively completed from home
  - Employees who self-disclose a vulnerability associated with COVID-19 should continue to work remotely.
- ❖ Maintain widespread, accurate testing and contact tracing.
- ❖ Advocate for worker safety and protections.
- ❖ Daily sanitization of all school facilities and implementing mitigation infrastructure such as no-touch hand-washing stations throughout the buildings with sanitation breaks during the day.
  - In addition to having the equipment/supplies, there must be sufficient training and clear guidelines for students and staff on how and when to use them safely and properly. Training must also include specifics on handwashing.



- Students with disabilities present an even greater challenge; they may have difficulty with understanding and adhering to social distancing and the changing hygiene recommendations.
- ❖ Follow available guidance from the CDC on maximum gathering sizes and personal protective equipment.
- ❖ Ensure that reliable, widespread COVID-19 testing, effective tracing and social distancing strategies have been used in the communities that are considering re-opening their public schools for face-to-face learning.
- ❖ Provide teachers and staff access to personal protective equipment and disinfectant items as well as training on proper usage.
  - The state must maintain sufficient supplies for all schools.
    - An inventory of what the specific needs are will be necessary for this to happen effectively.
  - PPE can provide a false sense of security. If and/or when they are used, there must be training on safe usage.
- ❖ Leverage labor management collaboratives to co-create reopening plans that ensure the safety of students, educators and communities.
- ❖ Screening of students and staff that appear symptomatic and separate them from the school population for testing.
- ❖ Expand school clinic capabilities with triage and isolation areas for students that present with symptoms while they await parent pick up.
- ❖ Provide school leaders with clear guidance to establish procedures if students or staff become unwell. Guidance should include monitoring student and staff health, maintaining regular contact with local health authorities and updating emergency plans and contact lists.
- ❖ Work with the county health departments to set up contact tracing when there is a reemergence of COVID-19 at a school.
- ❖ Ongoing, open communication with all stakeholders must continue.

## Student Success

The mobilization of Florida's teaching force to distance learning with almost no notice was a remarkable accomplishment. The tremendous work of Florida's educators and their students has rightfully been lauded as an example for the rest of the nation to follow.

However, despite this great work the learning conditions for Florida's students in the final quarter of the school year were suboptimal. The negative impacts of these conditions are felt even more strongly for students without consistent and reliable Internet connections or students as well as students with learning disabilities and those for whom English is not their first language.

As school campuses reopen, addressing the "COVID-19 Slide" and its disparate impact on students in poverty and those with learning disabilities will be paramount.

### Priorities and Recommendations:

#### *Academic success*

- ❖ Hybrid delivery of instruction available - continued delivery of instruction no matter what.
  - Seek policy waivers on number of student days, length of day, length of year, to allow for hybrid models or split scheduling for schools to ensure smaller classes and social distancing.
- ❖ Abeyance of testing that is not for diagnostic purposes for the 2020-2021 school year, allowing for a focus on depth, not breadth, of curriculum and content.
- ❖ Consider alternative calendars - incorporate physical distancing into the school schedule with split schedules, smaller class sizes, hybrid education models, staggered mealtimes, cohorting of groups of students for the entire day.
- ❖ Additional availability of trained substitute teachers.
- ❖ Suspend current accountability system including standardized tests, school grades and VAM scores.
- ❖ Create a multi-language communication plan for all stakeholders.
  - Include community and parent input.
- ❖ Suspend requirements for fire drills, active shooter drills and other planned emergency drills which disrupt student learning and could lead to large gatherings of students and staff.
- ❖ Consider modifying attendance requirements so that students are held to the expectation of completing their work - not necessarily to "checking in" to class every day.
- ❖ Hold harmless arts classes and electives from funding cuts.
- ❖ Leverage available resources to provide more robust digital learning.

### *Equity*

- ❖ One to one device policy for each student.
- ❖ Access to internet.
- ❖ Training on how to deliver instruction digitally; and for parents and students on how to access that instruction.
- ❖ Continue school feeding program.
- ❖ Flexible assignments, deadlines and encourage wraparound services.
- ❖ Engaging the homeless population.

### *Students with Special Needs (including students with ESE, ELL, 504 plans)*

- ❖ Deliver accommodations digitally – school districts must provide clear guidance for education specialists and teachers.
- ❖ Incorporate small groups of ESE students in before other students, in order to give them extra attention and time (aspirational).
- ❖ Utilize technology for OT and speech through distance learning or other mechanisms if available.
- ❖ Allow amendments to the IEP through distance learning plans.
  - Provide extra pay for ESE teachers to create these plans before the start of school.
- ❖ Reduce the amount of work required for students who are easily overwhelmed.
- ❖ Design all online learning so that it is accessible to students who may need larger font, more explanations etc. i.e. Universally Designed Learning. This will ensure success for all students, not just those with disabilities.
- ❖ Equal provisions and protections for all schools, ex. accommodations for deaf students who usually read lips.

### **Social & Emotional Well-being**

As a nation, we have suffered a collective trauma. Even for adults, these have been difficult times to understand to process. That is true even more so for the students we serve. As important as physical health and safety and student success are, we must recognize they cannot happen without also ensuring the social and emotional needs of students and educators are met.

Prolonged physical distancing, death and illness in our families and communities and economic dislocations, will leave many students and faculty with ongoing trauma and mental health issues and it is incumbent on us to meet their needs now

more than ever. We know from brain science that lack of psychological safety and the impact of adverse childhood experiences impede and even prevent learning.

These impacts will be widespread. This will require additional staff with expertise in mental health, to provide trauma and sensitivity training for all staff, students and parents. All staff should be trained on how to identify students struggling with trauma and refer them to mental health professionals for additional support.

#### Priorities and Recommendations:

- ❖ Additional funding for:
  - Mental health services
  - Additional staff training
  - Risk and trauma assessments
  - Student and staff support
- ❖ Time and training at the start of the school year, as well as ongoing training, for staff to receive trauma training and identification of trauma in students which will allow them to be referred for mental health services.
- ❖ Follow and use any CDC guidance on monitoring crises and trauma to students and families.
- ❖ Expand Crisis Teams to every school to monitor and assist with social and emotional health at each facility.
- ❖ Extended re-entry for students with focus on social and emotional impacts of COVID-19 to prepare the students for learning.
- ❖ Increased staffing (specialized instructional support personnel like school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, etc.) necessary to support students' social and emotional well-being.
  - Along with increased staffing, an increased emphasis on ensuring mental health professionals are able to perform their job function instead of working on administrative duties such as proctoring standardized tests.
- ❖ Partner with local medical and mental health professionals to provide a full range of services for students, such as those implemented in full-service community schools.
- ❖ Additional social workers to assist with building stronger connections with families and communities to better equip them to support student learning and engage them on supports to ease the transition back to school.

- ❖ Track the long-term effects of the pandemic on the students: changes in grades, test scores, graduation rates, absenteeism, etc.
- ❖ Provide teachers with all the possible support they need for students to have equity.

## Safe Working and Learning Conditions

Though it might sound cliché, there is much truth in the saying that “Educators’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions.” The COVID-19 Pandemic hit at a time when there was already a massive shortage of teachers and school staff in Florida. Many of those who work in Florida’s schools have underlying risk factors for COVID-19, either due to their age or a medical condition.

Educators have made it clear they desire nothing more than to return to schools and be with their students in person again, but doing so means that there must be safeguards in place to ensure that the simple act of returning to work does not jeopardize their health.

### Priorities and Recommendations:

- ❖ Sufficient funding for PPE for all staff and students.
- ❖ Clarification of leave provisions under State, Federal Law and the CARES ACT.
- ❖ Ensure employee privacy in relation to health and safety.
- ❖ Plan to maintain employee salary.
- ❖ Ensure that employees are not required to use personal devices to conduct classes.
- ❖ Plan to comply with public records laws and train employees in best practices in maintaining public records in a digital world.
- ❖ Plan to get employee feedback about various digital platforms used to provide instruction to students including, but not limited to, ease of use, security, student interaction and participation.
- ❖ Training for employees on the use of digital platforms and tools being used to aid in virtual instruction.
- ❖ Utilize the COVID-19 response as an opportunity to review policies on use of school facilities during emergencies.
  - Training videos for students, teachers, staff on COVID-19 related public health concerns.
- ❖ Institute pilot programs using research to determine how schools are working through this issue.

- ❖ Staggered schedules for both teachers and students.
- ❖ Ensure enforcement of health guidelines for students and employees in a fair and equitable manner.
- ❖ Publication of state, district and school plans in time for teachers to prepare adequately.
- ❖ Assess teacher and staff workload (ensure teachers aren't doing double work online and in school).
- ❖ Prioritize stress counseling.
- ❖ Expand district based virtual programs first to retain students in the district.
- ❖ Waivers on required drills that will compromise social distancing and CDC guidelines as well as any consequences for noncompliance.

### Investment in Florida's Public Schools

Investment in Florida's public schools is an investment in economic recovery. The necessary interventions will require significant investments in public health and technology in our schools. COVID-19 has made clearer than ever the inequalities in our society and underscores the need for public investments to combat this inequity. It is imperative Florida's leaders increase investment in the neediest schools, which are often attended by students of color. High-speed broadband, modern technology and hardware are essential for the future success of our students.

However, all of this rests on the fundamental belief that without a reliable vaccine, we must be incredibly thoughtful and deliberate in how we map out our new normal, which must include: some elements of physical distancing; infrastructure for testing, tracing and isolation; deploying public health interventions in our schools and workplaces and aligning them with the necessary educational supports.

There must also be an open mind and a flexibility to deal with unforeseen and novel circumstances that will inevitably arise as we try and return to this new normal. If we have learned from the past as recessionary forces grow, we must face the crisis with our best foot forward rather than limping in or reverting to the status quo.

#### Priorities and Recommendations:

- ❖ Employ alternatives beyond distance learning.
  - Seek policy waivers on number of student days, length of day, length of year, to allow for hybrid models or split scheduling for schools to ensure smaller classes and social distancing.

- ❖ Identify response and recovery financing for immediate investments in school water, sanitation and hygiene.
  - Direct education funding to schools hit hardest by the crisis, for example through formula-based funding that prioritizes the most marginalized.
  - PPE costs should be taken into consideration for economic purposes as well as cleaning products, relevant training, protocols and staffing.
- ❖ Allocations to help close the technological divide to provide as many electronic resources to all of our students.
- ❖ Waive school fees and other costs wherever possible and eliminate other barriers to entry to maximize re-enrollment rates.
- ❖ Ensure that all educators have professional pay and healthcare benefits and fight against privatization of educators' jobs particularly in the education support professionals' space.
- ❖ Rapid response for testing – partnerships with health departments, nurses in each school.
- ❖ Establish a mechanism to get in contact with non-English speaking parents and provide more access to these individuals.
- ❖ Increase investment in ESE student accommodations - IEPs, 504 plans, etc.
- ❖ Convene a special session for the allocations of CARES act funds.
- ❖ Maintain the Mental Health and School Safety allocations in the 2020-21 budget without cuts and investigate the possibility to increase funding because of the pandemic.
- ❖ Consider costs related to reduction of class sizes and necessary infrastructure that may be required such as portables, etc.
- ❖ Suspend all state funding of private schools that do not meet public school guidelines for safe and effective delivery of instruction.

## CONCLUSION

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The Florida Education Association would like to acknowledge and thank all of those who contributed their time and expertise to the Reopening Schools Committee. It is our hope that this document serves as a guideline for safely returning students, faculty and staff to school campuses. We realize that Florida is a diverse state and that what makes sense for one community might not make sense for another.

This document is not meant to be a static one. New information is being learned about the Coronavirus daily and as our knowledge of the virus grows, the knowledge gained should be incorporated into any plans to reopen school campuses.

As plans for schools continue to evolve, we firmly believe that the path forward must be centered around the shared goals of physical health and safety, student success, social and emotional well-being, safe working and learning conditions and an enduring investment in public education.

There is still much that is unknown and concrete answers to some very important questions remain elusive. But what we know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that public schools remain the bedrock of their communities. Together, students, parents and educators can work to expand horizons, to ensure that Florida's public schools don't just "return to normal" but come out of this crisis even stronger and with a greater sense of connection to the families they serve as well as the larger community.



## APPENDIX AND FURTHER READING

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- [American Federation of Teachers: A Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities](#)
- [National Education Association: Initial Member Brainstorm on Schools' Re-Opening for In-Person Learning](#)
- [Education International: Guidance to Reopen Schools and Education Institutions](#)
- [Joint Statement of National Education and Civil Rights Leaders on COVID-19 School Closure](#)
- [Florida School Boards Association Recommendations for Re-opening Florida's Public Schools](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control: Draft Reopening Guidance](#) (Pages 4-6 are school related)
- [Centers for Disease Control: School Reopening Decision Tree](#) (updated May 15)
- [Centers for Disease Control: School and Child Care Programs Guidance](#) (updated May 15)
- [UNICEF: Framework for Reopening Schools](#)
- [Great Lakes Center: Education in the Time of COVID-19: Remote learning Part 1](#)
- [McKinsey & Company: Perspectives for Opening Schools](#)
- [Education Resource Services: Financial Implications of COVID-19](#)
- [Education Next: A Blueprint for Back to School](#)
- [How to Reopen Schools: A 10-Point Plan for Keeping Equity at the Center](#)
- [Gov. DeSantis: May 4 Executive Order](#)
- [Re-Open Florida Task Force's Report to Gov. DeSantis](#)
- [WHO Guide for Reopening](#)
- [WHO Guidance for schools, workplaces and institutions](#)
- [FIU Reopening report](#)
- [Washington Choir CDC report on dangers of band/chorus/theatre](#)
- [An easier to read article about it: CDC report on toilet plumes](#)
- [Minnesota Report shows 3 likely possible projection models](#)
- [NIH Report on how long coronavirus lives on surfaces](#)

### Documents to consider for trainings:

[How quickly virus can spread by touching objects](#)

[Mask training video](#)

[Mask and Glove video](#)