

American Schools May Look Radically Different as They Reopen

By The Associated Press

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SAN FRANCISCO — School administrators across America are trying to re-imagine classrooms — and the prospect of reopening schools — in the era of social distancing.

Will there be staggered start times? Will students be asked to wear face coverings? Will class sizes be cut in half? What about school assemblies and sports and school buses and lunchtime?

With the majority of schools nationwide shut down, educators are scrambling to plan for the future after a chaotic few weeks that, for many districts, included closing all schools, deciding whether to waive assessment tests and whether and how to do distance learning. Next comes the important question of when schools can safely re-open.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom laid out a few possible scenarios this week for reopening the state's public schools to 6 million students, saying the timeline was still unclear but when students do eventually return things will look radically different.

“We need to get our kids back to school,” Newsom said. “And we need to do it in a safe way.”

The biggest challenge for schools is how to continue physical distancing among children and adults to ensure that “kids aren't going to school, getting infected and then infecting grandma and grandpa,” Newsom said.

That could mean requiring schools to stagger schedules, with some students arriving in the morning and the rest in the afternoon. Officials will be rethinking gym class, recess, school assemblies and all scenarios where students gather in large groups, he said. State officials, educators and unions will discuss those ideas and other possibilities for safe schooling in the coming weeks and months.

Robert Hull, president and chief executive of the National Association of State Boards of Education, said administrators across the country are asking not how, but if, schools will reopen in the fall, and planning for any number of scenarios.

Everything is being considered, he said, from masks and gloves to cutting class sizes and adding portable classrooms. Officials also are weighing the virus's impact on how school buildings and buses are cleaned, how to protect custodial staff, how food is prepared and how health care is delivered.

"Everybody says we hope we return to normal," Hull said. "It's not going to return to normal anytime soon because the new normal is going to be different."

For the moment, many districts are focused on trying to get through the school year while keeping an eye on what might happen in the fall.

"You're making battle plans," Hull said. Schools need to plan for a variety of possibilities: What if the virus is contained? What if the curve is flattened but there are still infections in the community? What if a new wave is starting? Schools need "not just Plan A and Plan B, but it maybe Plan C and Plan D."

Newsom said he won't loosen California's mandatory, stay-at-home order until hospitalizations, particularly those in intensive care units, "flatten and start to decline." And he said the state needs more testing, treatment and the ability for businesses, schools and childcare facilities to continue the physical distancing that has come to dominate public life. He said he would revisit the question of easing restrictions in two weeks.

Similar conversations are taking place at state school boards across the country. The issue is on Idaho's agenda Thursday, and several other states, including Arkansas and Mississippi, are starting to have the discussion, Hull said.

Issues of equity loom, including how to measure what students are learning and how to help those who have fallen behind. Many of the association's members are discussing what to do this summer and contemplating whether to extend the school year to offer summer learning, Hull said.

When students do return to school in California's rural Mariposa County, they will likely have to follow the same check-in procedure that local government employees do now, county Health Officer Eric Sergienko said. Before coming in each day, government employees answer a series of screening questions in a smart phone app with a checklist of symptoms. If they answer "yes" to any questions they have to stay home, and then get a follow-up call from a health officer.

"We would do the same thing for school," Sergienko said. "If any (students) had symptoms, then we would exclude them from school."

Education funding cutbacks have already led to teacher shortages in California and made campus nurses rare, raising questions about how officials might cope with extended days and ensure kids are healthy, said Tony Wold, associate superintendent of the West Contra Costa Unified School District, which includes 55 schools.

“We can’t just build new schools overnight. Even if the state gives us more money, where will the teachers come from?” said Wold, listing the ways schools are not built for social distancing. In his district near San Francisco, schools already stagger lunchtimes and put 8 to 10 kids at each table. Gym classes can have upwards of 50 students, and there are no empty, unused classrooms.

He said some schools will likely extend virtual learning into the fall or possibly figure out a rotation mixing online learning and classroom education.

“We're trying to reinvent how to do our business in a way we never did it before," Wold said. “This is probably the most Herculean challenge I have ever seen in public education.”

Thompson contributed to this report from Buffalo, New York. Associated Press writer Don Thompson in Sacramento, California, also contributed.