

KEEPING EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

RETURNING TO SCHOOL

WHEN GOVERNOR BAKER closed schools to protect public health in March, students, families, and educators were thrust into unprecedented circumstances. With no pre-existing plans for how to continue to support students and families outside of school buildings, educators and education leaders scrambled to figure out how to operate in this new reality. Predictably, the results were both inconsistent and inequitable. Many students saw their learning stagnate. Many others — especially in economically disadvantaged communities — were left behind.

As September fast approaches, Massachusetts is facing a school year that risks bringing about more of the same, magnified by months of isolation and loss. We say this with deep appreciation for the hard work of school and district leaders, who have spent their summer seeking a path forward in extremely challenging circumstances. We say this knowing, too, that these efforts have been driven by a commitment to equity and student well-being, and that there is no one-size-fits-all answer.

The reality, however, is that the challenges of reopening school buildings are so substantial that addressing them has led to the near neglect of everything else that comprises schooling — from teaching and learning to social-emotional supports, to the critical relationships between educators and families. In many districts, it has also led to little planning for remote learning, which health experts agree is likely to be necessary throughout the year.

If we don't want to end up where we did last spring, we must shift gears now. Rather than focusing on how to bring students and teachers back into school buildings, district leaders must leverage all of their own and their communities' resources to ensure schooling can continue, and meet the needs of students, families and educators.

A NOTE ON TIMING:

We recognize that this document is being published as districts release their final fall reopening plans. As most of the plans acknowledge, however, this year will require constant readjustment. Already, many districts have chosen to start the year remotely so as to prepare better for a transition to hybrid learning options. We offer the recommendations below to inform these ongoing planning efforts.

The recommendations presented here represent our organizations' best thinking on how state, district and school leaders could approach the resumption of school. Given the uncertainty and unprecedented nature of these times, these recommendations may evolve. Expect further iterations of this document in coming weeks and months — and please share your input by writing to MEEP@MassEduEquity.org.

What does that look like? It looks like first and foremost, understanding community needs and assets. The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and enduring systemic racism have devastated families and communities, particularly Black, Latino, and economically-disadvantaged communities across the Commonwealth and the country. At the same time, these communities and families have shown incredible resilience and flexibility in these unprecedented times. We need to listen to their experiences and recommendations first and foremost.

It looks like developing a strong instructional program that can be accessed remotely or in person, and then leveraging community-wide resources and partnerships to find the right access mode for all students, prioritizing those with the highest needs. It looks like establishing strong collaboration and communication structures that enable schools to maintain close relationships with the students and families they serve and to nimbly activate school and community-based resources when a student or family is struggling.

In the pages that follow, we lay out 10 recommendations that education leaders can take to help ensure that all students — and especially those already underserved in our schools — continue to learn this coming school year.



WE URGE EDUCATION LEADERS TO WORK WITH THEIR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES TO:

1	Conduct a community needs assessment that includes all families and educators to understand their circumstances and hopes for the school year
2	Assess community resources, including available spaces and personnel that can support student learning
3	Set up a strong remote-learning program that forms the foundation for content delivery
4	Based on the assessment of community needs and assets, identify ways to provide in-person instructional support for as many students as possible without sacrificing safety
5	Make sure all educators — including the paraprofessionals, community-based organization staff, and others — have the training and information they need to do what is expected of them.
6	Adjust (or establish) early warning and tiered student support systems to fit the current environment.
7	Establish strong structures to ensure sustained collaboration between all staff supporting students — including teachers, paraprofessionals, community-based organization staff, and others interacting with families.
8	Ensure that all sites where students will be learning — including students' homes — have the instructional resources and technical assistance needed for student to engage in learning.
9	Ensure (and if necessary, build) a consistent two-way communication system between the district/school and families.
10	Commit to transparency to keep equity front and center.

We describe each of these steps in more detail below.

District and school leaders cannot do this work alone. The words “It takes a village” have never been truer than now. We urge education leaders to take the following steps and stand ready to support them in this work.

1

Conduct a community needs assessment that includes all families and educators.

In recent weeks, most districts have surveyed families regarding their return-to-school preferences. That’s a good start, but 1) in many districts, less than half of families responded to the surveys; and 2) district leaders need to know far more about family circumstances than the information many of the surveys collected. For example, if school buildings don’t fully reopen, will families need childcare? Will there be someone at home able to support remote learning, and what languages do they speak? Does the family have enough devices and high-speed internet to enable all students to participate in live instruction? Where in the home (or elsewhere) will the students conduct their school work? Does the student require in-person services that cannot be provided remotely? Would the student benefit from counseling/mental health supports, especially if the family has personally experienced illness or economic hardship? Review data on student participation in remote learning in the spring. Is there evidence that the student has become disengaged, and if so, what were the barriers to engagement?

District leaders also need extensive information from their teachers. Do teachers have or live with someone who has any underlying health conditions that increase risks related to COVID-19? Would they be open to teaching in person, with precautions to protect their safety — perhaps in exchange for smaller student loads and class sizes? What training and support will they need, both to support their students, and to maintain their own physical and mental health?



2

Assess community resources.

School buildings are not the only place where schooling can happen. Are there libraries, other public buildings, places of worship, or community-based organizations — such as those that run summer or after-school programs — that would be willing to “host” a small group of students? Are there people in the community (such as community-based organization staff, AmeriCorps volunteers, or pre-service teacher candidates) who would be able to help staff these locations? What resources (personal protective equipment, technology, meals, etc.) do these organizations need to be able to host students? Are there other individuals or organizations in the community — such as retired educators or college students — who can provide students with one-on-one support (such as tutoring or mentorship) virtually? What plans to use their organizations or programs have parents and families already established for the fall? Are there parents in the community who would be willing and able to support these efforts?

Moreover, what community-based resources are available to meet families’ broader needs — such as food insecurity, health issues, or housing insecurity? What do these organizations need from the school district/schools in order to best target their services?



3

Set up a strong remote learning program that forms the foundation for content delivery.

Set up a strong remote learning program, including a minimum of five hours of access to teachers via a combination of synchronous instruction and call-in office hours per day. This program should form the instructional foundation upon which the content delivery strategy is built.

With input from educators — and to the extent possible, families — select, purchase, and implement a district-wide curriculum or curricula that:

- Work in a virtual environment
- Are aligned with state academic standards, prioritizing the core standards DESE identified last spring
- Reflect the voices, achievements, and experiences of historically excluded groups in the United States, such as people of color, people with disabilities, women, and the LGBTQ community
- Support teachers in differentiating instruction based on student achievement and needs and scaffolding to make up for unfinished learning without sacrificing rigorous, grade-level content
- Are available in partner languages for schools with dual-language programs
- Can be supplemented by project-based learning activities that are authentic and community-based

State leaders should leverage the CURATE and Kaleidoscope initiatives to assist with this work. Federal Coronavirus Relief Fund dollars can help offset the costs.

Provide ongoing training and coaching to all educators in virtual instructional strategies that emphasize cultural responsiveness and competence. Ensure that the training includes rigorous content delivery, relationship building, and positive classroom management strategies. In all trainings/communications, emphasize the importance of maintaining high expectations for students and creating opportunities for healthy interactions among students and with adults, whether remotely or in person.

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4

Based on the assessment of community needs and assets, identify ways to provide in-person instructional support for as many students as possible without sacrificing student, family or educator safety.

In doing so, prioritize students with the highest levels of personal or family need for in-person learning opportunities and one-on-one support. That should include:

- Students with disabilities, especially those requiring the most intensive services
- Younger students (under the age of 10), especially those who require childcare and whose caregivers cannot supervise remote learning at home
- Students with housing instability who do not have a safe place to learn
- Students in foster care
- Students who particularly struggled/became disengaged during the spring remote learning period
- English learners who educators or family members believe particularly need in-person support

Structures to consider might include:

- Full-day, personalized instructional services for a small number of students with the highest levels of need (see [Marin County's Community School](#) for an example)
- Setting up small learning “pods” in school buildings as well as community spaces, such as libraries, churches, museums and community-based organizations’ spaces (see San Francisco’s planned [Learning Hub](#) model). Pods can be supervised by a variety of trained personnel, including teachers, paraprofessionals, community-based organization staff, daycare providers, or AmeriCorps volunteers. Instructionally, they could rely on a flipped classroom model, with some educators designing and delivering content remotely to multiple pods (as well as students learning from home) and in-person staff providing supervision, responding to clarifying questions and guiding discussion.
- Keeping the majority of older students remote and leveraging all school buildings (including middle and high schools) to serve younger students in person. Note that in the absence of ability to hire more elementary school teachers, staffing would need to function similarly to the learning pod option above.
- Leveraging outdoor spaces (while the weather allows) to provide learning and socialization opportunities and relationship-building between students and teachers, while most of the instruction/schoolwork happens remotely.

Whatever the approach, clearly communicate the district’s rationale to the entire school community. Some families are bound to be unhappy if the district is unable to provide their child with in-person instruction. Clear, honest communication that centers equity for the most underserved and calls on all involved to do their part to ensure all kids can continue to learn is key.

5

Make sure all educators — including paraprofessionals, community-based organization staff, and others — have the training and information they need to do what is expected of them.

Work with school leaders and educators to tailor professional development and collaboration structures to their needs.

Trainings might include:

- Culturally responsive teaching in a remote environment
- Classroom community building and establishing routines
- Instructional practices that support students' social-emotional needs
- Training on using curricular materials and platforms the district has selected, especially on strategies for scaffolding content
- Operating in a flipped classroom environment
- For all staff, but especially those who are not certified teachers, training for online classroom management/facilitation, identifying and preventing cyberbullying, physical safety procedures, and facilitating the types of activities they will be required to lead
- Relationship building and culturally competent communication with students and families
- Restorative discipline practices in a virtual environment

With students coming in following months of unfinished learning, educators, parents/caregivers and students themselves will need clear, actionable data on what students know and are able to do. **At the beginning of the school year, administer diagnostic assessments (in-person or remotely),** aligned to core grade-level standards, to all students and provide all educators (including paras and community-based organization staff) and families with data for their students.

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DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS, ALIGNED TO CORE
GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS, TO ALL STUDENTS.**

6

Adjust (or establish) early warning and tiered student support systems to fit the current environment.

Early warning systems, which alert educators and education leaders that a student may be struggling, help schools “catch” students before they fall far off track. They are especially critical in the current environment, when there is a risk of students not only falling behind academically, but getting lost in the system entirely. Early warning systems should be modified to include information such as:

- Attendance, including accessing synchronous instruction, logging into online platforms and showing up for in-person learning opportunities
- Assignment completion
- Assignment grades
- Behavioral or mental health issues of students and families
- Report outs of communications with the family or student — or inability to reach the family or student following several attempts

Early warning systems only work if there are teams in place to monitor the data and respond when necessary. School-level student support teams should review data on a weekly basis, and, at the first sign of trouble — such as a student missing classes for more than two days in a row, or not submitting an assignment for several days — collect additional qualitative information from the student’s teachers and family navigator (see recommendation 9 below), and develop and implement an action plan.



7

Establish strong structures to ensure sustained collaboration between all staff supporting students — including teachers, paraprofessionals, community-based organization staff, and others.

With multiple individuals interacting with students and families (e.g., a teacher delivering remote instruction, an AmeriCorps volunteer supervising the pod, and a school counselor serving as the family's navigator), close collaboration among the adults working with each child will be critical. School and district leaders will need to establish both expectations and structures for such collaboration. That should include:

- Establishing clear, differentiated responsibilities for staff in response to their conditions, strengths, and needs. For example, how might on-site staff be expected to support remote learning?
- Setting the expectations that all adults working with a student have a shared responsibility for their growth and advancement, and that collaboration will involve mutual respect and shared authority among all individuals working with a student and their family
- Development of written agreements and memos of understanding between schools and other organizations and written descriptions of relative responsibilities and roles of the participating individuals
- Mechanisms that ensure regular communication and effective exchange of information on students' experiences and progress
- Opportunities to share what is and is not working within and across schools and districts to identify promising practices and tools/resources

8

Ensure that all sites where students will be learning — including students' homes — have the instructional resources and technical assistance needed for students to engage.

All students must have access to a tablet or laptop and internet access. Students will also need other resources, such as picture/story books and manipulatives for hands-on activities for the youngest learners, and science kits for all students. Many will also need educational supplies (paper, pencils, scissors, etc.) and cleaning/safety supplies. Districts and state leaders must also ensure that all students who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals continue to receive them.

Remember that many families (as well as some educators) do not use computers or the internet on a regular basis. Prior to the start of instruction, and throughout the year, provide training and technical support for parents/family caregivers, and all educators supporting students, either in person or remotely. For example, hold multi-lingual information sessions for families on how to use Zoom or Google Classroom, how to submit assignments, and who to call if they are having trouble connecting.

9

Ensure (and if necessary, build) a consistent two-way communication system between the district/schools, and students and families.

The goals of the system should be: 1) To check in on student and family well-being; 2) To share relevant district/school information, as well as updates on student progress; and 3) To seek student and family feedback and input on their experiences with learning, concerns they might have, or what they would like to see done differently. All communications should be translated into as many languages as possible (at minimum, into all languages spoken by more than 5% of the district's families), with interpreters available for all "live" interactions. Communication system should include:

- Assigning a "navigator" to every family who should be expected to check in with the student and family at least once a week, and more frequently when the situation warrants it (such as when health or educational issues arise, or when family input is needed for school or district decisions).

The navigator can be, but does not have to be, the child's teacher. Paraprofessionals, administrators, and support staff can serve as navigators, too. Keep in mind linguistic needs and other family circumstances when assigning navigators. For example, assign staff who speak Haitian Creole first to families who require communication in that language. Families with particularly challenging circumstances (e.g., families who are housing insecure or have lost a family member) should be assigned more experienced navigators, such as school social workers or psychologists.

All navigators should be trained in culturally competent communication, family privacy protections (especially for undocumented or mixed status families), and who to reach out to for additional support, particularly in cases that may pose safety risks to students.

- Setting up multilingual hotlines where students and families can call in with questions, challenges, and updates, as well as web-based portals where families can submit feedback and input.
- Leveraging multiple modes of communication to share information — especially urgent announcements. Consider phone calls, text messaging, emails, local radio and TV stations, community newsletters, and community-based organizations' communication networks.

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10

Commit to transparency to keep equity front and center.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated longstanding disparities in student learning experiences. Yet months after school buildings closed, there is a lot that educators, families and the general public still don't know about how and whether students continued to learn last spring. We do not know (except for anecdotally) how many hours of direct, synchronous instruction each school or district offered. In most districts, we do not know how many students participated in remote learning, or how that changed over time.

Given the likely variation in how students will continue to learn next year — from home? from school? from learning pods around the district? — collecting, monitoring and publicly reporting data on student learning experiences and outcomes *by student group* will be more important than ever. State leaders should continue to collect all of the previously established data, including participation and successful completion of advanced coursework, discipline rates, 2021 MCAS results, and graduation rates. They should also collect and report indicators tailored to the current crisis, such as the learning model students are participating in, and multiple measures of engagement (hours of participation in synchronous and asynchronous classes, respectively, completion and submission of assignments, etc.)

WHEN COVID-19 STRUCK, families around the state went above and beyond to make sure students kept learning, taking hours out of their days and working late into the night to supervise instruction, rearranging furniture and rewiring their homes to make it possible for kids to Zoom, and mastering new technologies and learning platforms. Students taught themselves how to learn remotely, often while supporting their younger siblings, too. In the absence of clear guidance and while battling the virus and ongoing systemic racism, families worked hard to fill the gaps. Many teachers went out of their way for students, making themselves available at all hours of the day, learning new tools and instructional methods, and organizing drive-by parades to connect with young people. In this moment, and throughout next year, we must work together to demonstrate the same flexibility, creativity and adaptability they have and continue to display, and ensure that students receive an equitable education.

This brief is a collaborative effort of the following organizations:

