With new school year coming, no easy answers on when to reopen, how to address losses in learning

Tim Anderson [1]

After the end to an unforeseen school year across the Midwest, state and local education leaders now face a new set of challenges and uncertainties as the start of another year looms. “We have been encouraging our district leaders and our school leaders to have a Plan A, a Plan B and a Plan C,” Illinois State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said in May during a Facebook Live discussion organized by Illinois Rep. Emanuel “Chris” Welch.

“We may see the start of school [in the fall] in a remote fashion. We may see a combination where some children are allowed to come to school on certain days, or where we take the upper grades and are able to spread them out in a school building with social distancing norms. Or we may be able to come back full force.”

Whether and how schools open will get much attention during the summer months, and final decisions are likely to vary not only among different states and provinces, but within the jurisdictions themselves. In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker’s five-phase plan [2] for a general “reopening” of the state divides it into 11 different regions, with decisions on when to open schools based on COVID-19’s impact on these specific geographic areas. Under his plan, Illinois schools could reopen in the fourth phase, when there has been a sustained decline in local rates of COVID-19 infections and hospital admissions.

In Wisconsin, schools would open in the first of a three-phase plan [3] unveiled in April by Gov. Tony Evers. That first phase occurs after two weeks of downward trajectories of the following: 1) influenza-like illnesses and 2) positive COVID-19 tests as a percentage of the total administered.

But Evers’ plan also notes that during Wisconsin’s first two reopening phases, “people over age 60, including employees and those who are medically vulnerable, should continue to shelter in place.” This would include teachers, administrators and other school staff (and likely some students), an indication that the coming school year might be not as cut-and-dried as all remote learning or a total reopening.

In Ohio, a task force of school leaders has been exploring various contingency plans, such as dividing students into two groups that alternate between going to school one day and taking part in online learning the next, The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer [4] reported in May. In Illinois, Ayala said, one idea for schools is to prioritize in-person instruction for at-risk students and/or those who lack access to the necessary technologies.

Preparing to tackle achievement gaps

In late April, The Council of State Governments’ Midwestern Legislative Conference Education Committee hosted a webinar [5] for state and provincial legislators and others on the impact of school closures and distance learning. One of the messages: Be ready in the fall to ramp up remediation to address expected losses in student learning and increases in achievement gaps due to factors such as lost in-person instructional time, the inadequacy of some school districts’ remote-learning plans, and variations in family learning environments.

“I think the best thing states can do is to have a good assessment in the fall, or maybe even in the summer,” Sean Gill, a research analyst for the Center on Reinventing Public Education, said on the webinar. “That will help us understand where student learning is, and allow schools to plan accordingly.”

The next step after testing is to provide resources to schools, staff, students and parents for the remediation response — a challenge in normal times, let alone with the fiscal problems facing states and their local districts.
Gill suggested the possibility of new partnerships with nonprofits and other service providers to help with remedial coursework or to meet the social-emotional needs of students. He added that states could seek assistance from young people willing and able to commit to public service.

“A state may have a lot of recent college graduates looking for jobs,” he said. “It might be something that states can consider to rapidly deploy into the schools to offer tutoring and counseling support.”

A longstanding initiative in Minnesota is one example of how this might work. That state’s Reading Corps began a decade-and-a-half ago and continues to receive state support via a yearly legislative appropriation.

Members of Reading Corps receive training on how to deliver evidence-based interventions to young students who struggle with reading. The state also has a Math Corps program for fourth- to eighth-graders. Reading and Math Corps members (who can be new college graduates, retirees or others) work alongside teachers in the schools; they get paid a stipend, receive health insurance and are eligible for education scholarships.

States also are likely to look at ways of strengthening the delivery of e-, or distance, learning. The federal CARES Act, signed into law in March, includes $16 billion for states to use for K-12 education (a portion of that total also can be used for higher education). In letters sent to governors and education commissioners, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos encouraged states to use some of those dollars to strengthen remote learning.

On the April webinar, Gill noted that there already have been increased local investments in WiFi hot spots to expand access to families. He also said states could develop new initiatives that connect low-income households to the existing free or low-cost programs offered by internet providers.

In Minnesota, the closure of schools and move to distance learning “really focused the spotlight on equity,” said Jeff Plaman, online and digital learning specialist for the state Department of Education. “It’s not just access to the devices, access to the internet,” he said. “Beyond that, it’s thinking about how different families, based on their lived experiences, can support the kind of learning that teachers are expecting.”
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