

Stakeholders Reopening Recommendations for Houston ISD Schools

Educators, support staff and parents want to return to school, but fear reopening without the infrastructure and investment to do so safely and equitably. The bare bones plan released by the governor on July 7th is unacceptably vague and hardly adequate. It leaves the details up to the school districts, provides no additional funding, and does not even meet the low threshold set by the White House in April.

Therefore, the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), HESP, CVPE, SEIU Texas, Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO, Houston DSA and parent and community groups in all nine school board districts **are providing these recommendations for reopening Houston ISD public schools.** These recommendations build on guidelines published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the framework created by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Delay in-person instruction until the following criteria are met:

1. **A decline in new cases for at least 14 consecutive days, a positivity test rate of less than five percent** and a transmission rate of less than 1.0.
2. **Testing, contract tracing and isolation capacity** in each public health jurisdiction.
3. **A robust public health infrastructure** from the state, county and local health departments to provide support to school districts for effective disease surveillance, tracing and isolation protocols for those who are infected or quarantined
4. **Comprehensive plan to reopen schools in phases** giving priority to the neediest children, such as the homeless, and moving forward over time to full reopening.
5. **Close non-essential businesses** to flatten the curve so that children have a chance of in person instruction sooner rather than later.

These additional criteria are essential for both virtual and eventual in-person instruction:

1. **Include all stakeholders in any plan** to restart schooling through a task force that includes youth, families, educators, support personnel, union leaders, and community partners.
2. **Fund schools based on enrollment instead of on average daily attendance** for the duration of the pandemic.
3. **Develop reopening plans consistent with CDC guidance** for daily sanitation, disinfection and physical distancing.
4. **Ensure a massive investment in public schools** including the release of CARES Act funds to school districts.
5. **Integrate racial and economic justice equity assessments into all reopening plans.** We must return to a new and better normal, not to a pre-COVID status quo that failed too many students and families.
6. **Suspend high stakes testing.** This means no STAAR, no benchmarks nor universal screener. Teachers formatively assess their own students.
7. **Provide professional development** to include social, emotional learning for COVID-19 and other issues and teacher training to improve and personalize online curriculum.

VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION

Given the current spike in COVID-19 cases in Houston, **we recommend virtual instruction in the fall** or until our community thinks it is safe to return. It is the height of hubris that the governor is more focused on opening the economy than on the health and well-being of our children and the people who educate them.

While virtual instruction provides the lowest safety risk, it is far from equitable. The virtual instruction plan in the spring left too many students behind and did not take into account the great degree to which schools are more than just about learning. Therefore, all virtual instruction must include significant additional support for vulnerable student populations and funding for additional staff.

EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION

1. **Free universal access to the internet, 1:1 computer distribution** or other digital devices for all public school families, and computer onboarding/skill-building classes for families in their home languages. Local governments should provide universal access to free wifi.
2. **Personalized tutors and mentors** for historically disenfranchised and vulnerable students utilizing a combination of volunteer and paid tutors. No teacher can reasonably support 200 students remotely without support.
3. **Additional assistance provided to students with special needs or who experienced racial or economic inequity** exacerbated by the pandemic, with increased, dedicated staffing and resources to meet the needs of students including ESL and Special Education students.
4. **Homeless students and students with challenging home environments** need a physical space to learn even during 100% virtual instruction—at school, at YMCAs, Baker-Ripley, etc.
5. **Virtual learning should approximate classroom learning** as much as possible in a developmentally appropriate way.
6. **Hiring more counselors, social workers and mental health professionals** to support students and families.
7. Childcare for teachers and support staff utilizing the county-provided hospital staff essential worker childcare as a model.
8. **Plans must be highly targeted and nuanced** with significant humanizing support—school by school, teacher by teacher, even student by student.

PHASING IN FACE-TO-FACE INSTRUCTION

Once there are 14 consecutive days of declining COVID-19 cases in Harris County, the test positivity rate is less than five percent and there is a fully functional test, trace and isolate program in Harris County, **Houston ISD should implement a phased reopening which should be determined in consultation with appropriate public health officials.**

The process should include:

1. **The virtual instruction “runway” period must extend through the fall** or until the community thinks it is safe.

2. **Priority should be given to students with special educational needs, those who live in poverty or are homeless** for phased in-person instruction.
3. Teachers and staff, especially those who are immuno-compromised or whose family members are immuno-compromised, **must be given the opportunity to choose virtual instruction for the remainder of the pandemic.**
4. **Families should be allowed to choose their preference**, either in person or virtual.
5. **Develop staggered schedules** to reduce the number of students and staff on campus at any one time with staggered cohorts of students on campus on different days or on half days, adjusted practices for ending/beginning the school day, passing periods, and lunch periods.
6. **Efforts should be made to provide small group (11 per class) early childhood instruction instead of virtual instruction.**
7. Students must stay at home when sick with equitable access to online learning options to minimize lost instructional time.
8. **More teachers and tutors are needed to implement schedules with smaller class sizes including a nurse at every school** and more custodians, counselors and mental health professionals.
9. **Utilize outdoor learning and large spaces** like cafeterias in novel ways.
10. **Establish a mobile health clinic with testing capacity** at every school or school hub, providing access to family and community members.
11. **ARDS should be virtual** to reduce the number of visitors to school campuses.

SAFETY AND PHYSICAL DISTANCING

The health and safety of our school communities must be our highest priority during reopening.

1. **Each school must have a safety and reopening team** including teachers, staff, parents, students and community members to ensure that reopening plans are being implemented on each campus. This will include a system for regular communication with stakeholders.
2. **Schools and classrooms must be reconfigured to provide for physical distancing.** CDC recommendations for physical distancing (6 ft between students) should be utilized with a maximum of 15 students in a room depending on room size.
3. **Clean and disinfect frequently** touched surfaces within the school and on school buses at least daily or between use and minimize sharing of high touch materials.
4. **Ensure easy access to supplies** including soap, hand sanitizer (60% alcohol), tissues, and no-touch trash cans. Provide PPE including but not limited to cloth face masks, gloves, clear faces shields, for all staff and students of all ages.
5. **Adhere to all CDC guidelines for regular screening** and sick person isolation, signage, ventilation, deep cleaning of facilities, including facilitating outdoor learning where possible.
6. **To reduce exposure in hallways**, establish staggered class dismissal times.
7. **Educators and school support personnel must stay home when sick**, with guaranteed sick pay to ensure that financial hardship is minimized. Protocols must be developed for COVID-19 testing sick employees and students and for communicating COVID-19 cases to the school and community.
8. **Expand the nurse and custodial staff budgets** and provide hazard pay for custodial staff and other staff who are at greater risk of exposure.
9. Ensure that all schools have **modern HVAC systems and HEPA filters**.

10. **Increase the number of bus routes** to ensure social distancing on school buses. Create physical distance between children on school buses (for example, seating children one child per seat, every other row).

LEARNING

An adequate response to this crisis will require a fundamental change in our approach to teaching and learning. This includes

1. **Suspend high stakes testing and assessment** (state and district) for the coming school year, with aggressive pursuit by Houston ISD and the state of any applicable waivers.
2. **Teacher and staff evaluations should be suspended during the crisis** as allowed by state law or state waiver.
3. **Support culturally relevant curriculum and trauma-informed practices.**
4. Maintain a well rounded curriculum by ensuring that art, music, physical education classes are included in reopening plans and offered through distance learning.
5. **Ensure that school reopening plans are inclusive and equitable for all educators and students** and that reflect and honor the experiences of working class, Black, Latinx, and other historically disenfranchised communities.

A NEW AND BETTER NORMAL

We must not return to the pre-COVID status quo that failed too many of our students, educators, and their families. Students who are being evicted or are hungry can't learn - schools must not reopen and allow "business as usual" until the basic needs of our students, their families, and our workers are met. This should include-

1. **Expand community schools** with wraparound services programs: embed housing, food, health, dental, and job services in neighborhood schools. Community schools are a proven way to begin to address pervasive structural access issues and racial inequities.
2. **Fully fund equitable** and safe reopening.
3. **Invest in addressing systemic issues** surrounding and impacting education, including mortgage and rent cancellation for families in economic crisis, school-based community food programs, universal wifi access, and a more robust public health infrastructure.
4. **Develop restorative justice and transformative practices** as a replacement for punitive disciplinary practices to build healthy school communities and to eliminate institutionalized racism.

CONCLUSION

We insist that decisions about reopening our schools include those who will be directly impacted, prioritizing student and worker safety above all else. Public schools and educators are essential to our society. We must ensure that plans to safely reopen these critical public spaces - the very hearts of our communities - are developed with those who work and study there. We only have one chance to reopen our schools safely. We must all work together to ensure that we do.

Sources

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