

Florida School Reopening Plans: Initial Plans from Mid-July

Policy Brief

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This policy brief provides preliminary evidence on Florida school districts' plans for reopening of schools for the coming academic school year. Drawing on the UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida School Reopening Plans Database, this policy brief documents that, as of mid-July, about one quarter of Florida schools had not publicly released reopening plans. Of those that had, about three quarters detailed plans for a new digital/virtual learning option. Of districts with public plans, very few had plans to limit class sizes, about one third detailed plans to require masks in some situations, and a handful of districts had plans to mandate masks at all times. This brief is the first in a series that will track the development of reopening plans through the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

School Reopenings Amidst COVID-19


Schools across the nation are currently grappling with how to reopen schools for the upcoming academic year. The COVID-19 pandemic, which ended most students' school year early last spring, continues to spread; yet, there is widespread recognition that disrupted education poses a serious risk to students, potentially resulting in students falling behind and exacerbated disparities in achievement. Furthermore, it is clear that returning students to school is a necessary step for many parents to return to work and for sustained economic recovery. As a result, policymakers and educators are faced with the challenge of developing plans that provide access to learning for students and support working parents, while also protecting the health of the community.

Policymakers at the federal level and in the state of Florida are prioritizing a return to brick-and-mortar schooling. Recently, Governor DeSantis and Education Commissioner Corcoran mandated that Florida schools return to offering brick-and-mortar education in August, though school districts are allowed to submit plans for providing alternative forms of learning pending state approval. The approaches taken by districts across the state vary and are rapidly evolving. This policy brief presents initial evidence on the state of school reopening plans in Florida as described on school district websites between July 11th and July 17th. It is the first in a series of

briefs that will track the evolution of Florida school reopening plans through the beginning of the academic year.

Reopening Plans are Emerging

As of mid-July, almost three quarters of school districts in the state of Florida had communicated reopening plans on their website. Districts were identified as having a communicated plan if they had a description of how students would return to school in the fall publicly posted on the district website. For some districts, this was as simple as a statement that all schools would return to brick-and-mortar learning as usual. For other districts, these plans included details on various options available to parents and students for the return to schooling, even if these details were continuing to be refined and revised. Across the state, 72% of districts had communicated a reopening plan as of mid-July.



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This meant that about one out of every four school districts in the state had yet to communicate a plan for reopening publicly via their website as of mid-July. This, of course, does not mean that these districts did not have plans or were not in the process of planning. Many mentioned on their websites that they were actively developing plans, and some noted specific dates when the details of such plans would be available. In some cases, the districts had removed earlier plans in response to the state mandate that schools reopen brick-and-mortar schools for five days per week. For example, Duval County Public Schools had released an early version of a plan that had students attending school only several days a week. This plan was taken down following the state mandate and replaced with a note that the district was revising their plan in response before sharing a new plan.

Stakeholder Surveys and Feedback

Ahead of developing and releasing reopening plans, many districts across Florida surveyed stakeholders to gather feedback about students returning to school in the fall. At least 34 districts sent out surveys to stakeholders, with most being administered from early June to early July. From the links that remained open and reopening plans that mentioned the survey results, most surveys sought feedback on preferences for fall learning opportunities, and some asked for feedback on students' experiences with virtual learning in the spring.

The salience of the surveys in reopening plans varied by district. For instance, Miami-Dade included exact statistics on stakeholder support for various safety precautions, whereas Duval underscored themes, such as the need for schools to reopen to accommodate working parents. In other districts, reopening plans were less clear about how stakeholder feedback informed the plan's formation.

Virtual and Hybrid Options for Learning

Florida has a robust history of offering virtual learning options to students. The Florida Virtual School's (FLVS) enrollment is among the highest of any virtual school in the nation and is a content provider for many virtual schools nationwide. All students in the state have the option of enrolling in FLVS as a public school option. In addition, almost every school district in the state also had an existing virtual or e-school option. In some cases, these virtual options were run by the district, while in other cases they were franchises of FLVS (meaning students still counted as enrolled in their district but accessed FLVS content). A number of districts in more rural settings offered their virtual option through regional cooperatives. As a result, almost every student in the state already had the choice of a virtual school option prior to the pandemic.

As a result of the pandemic, however, a number of other virtual options have emerged. Of school districts that had communicated reopening plans, 73% detailed options for a new digital/virtual option. In many cases, these options are tied to students' home schools, allowing them to continue to access teachers and classmates in their neighborhood school and potentially facilitating an easier transition back to brick-and-mortar schooling. For example, in Alachua County Public Schools, students have the option to attend school in person, enroll in the existing virtual school (Alachua e-school), or take part in a newly created "Digital Academy" provided through their regularly assigned school. The Digital Academies provide access to learning content and synchronous "Zoom" lessons on a daily basis.

About 3 in 4 districts with reopening plans described a new virtual/digital option

Structural Changes

While very few school districts announced plans to limit class sizes, there were plans in some districts to restructure school environments. Cohort models are being considered and instituted in at least three districts, most commonly within elementary grades to prevent the spread of the virus if a student were to test positive. Other districts mentioned a move to block scheduling in grades 6-12 to cut down on hallway traffic. As of this first round of data collection, only 4% of districts had announced plans to delay the start of the school year, though doing so is being actively discussed among many districts.

Safety and Health Precautions

In addition to describing options for educational settings for the fall and changes to the structure of the learning environment, many school districts also included details about their safety and health precautions. Many of these plans detailed how districts would approach cleaning of schools and the ways in which schools would work to limit the spread of the virus for students attending brick-and-mortar schooling.

While most districts discussed plans to enhance distancing and limit the gatherings of large groups (such as eliminating assemblies or employing alternative settings for lunch), less than half (43%) of districts with reopening plans explicitly noted that they planned to distance desks within classrooms. Others mentioned that desks would be distanced to the extent possible, but often, it was not clear that student work spaces could be distanced to the recommended six-foot distance.

Meals and transportation pose unique challenges for districts. School districts varied in their plans to maintain social distance at lunch. For example, Miami-Dade described plans for students to eat outside while Nassau described exploring options for plexiglass dividers in the lunchroom. Reopening plans that included transportation changes noted potential mask requirements on buses, assigned seating, and attempts to keep family members seated together.

Of the districts with reopening plans, about 28% mentioned plans to require masks in certain situations. In some cases, masks were required on buses, when transitioning between classes, or when arriving and leaving for the day, but were not required during in-class instructional time. There were, however, four additional districts that mentioned plans to require masks at all times. It is likely that this figure may change in coming weeks as a number of districts are actively considering proposals to require masks at schools.

About 1 in 3 districts with a reopening plan described plans to require masks in at least some settings

Conclusions

The initial round of data collection on school reopening plans indicates that Florida districts are at various stages of planning for school reopening for the new academic year and, among those with public plans, are varying in their approaches to both structural and safety/health precautions at school. Such variation is expected and appropriate given that districts across the state face differing local situations with regard to the educational setting, student needs, and COVID-19 risk. That one quarter of districts were yet to make plans publicly available, however, complicates planning not only for students and families but also for school personnel. Moving forward, districts should continue consulting with stakeholders as they develop plans and work to ensure that comprehensive plans are clearly communicated to stakeholders. In the coming weeks, the UF Education Policy Research Center will release companion briefs that provide additional updates on the plans for reopening schools in Florida.

Methodological Note

The data drawn on for this policy brief came from the UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida School Reopening Plans Database. District reopening plans were gathered between July 11th and July 17th. Coding of reopening plans was based on publicly available information on school district websites that could be readily found. As this is a constantly evolving situation, plans continue to change rapidly in response to federal, state, and local conditions. In some cases, districts may have plans or additional details that were not available or could not be found on their website. While this brief and the accompanying database provide useful comparisons of reopening plans, we recognize that they may not include all details that districts have communicated, and we encourage individuals to consult their local school district for official and up-to-date details on reopening plans.

Additional Resources

The interactive UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida Schools Reopening Plans Database can be found at:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1JxE3N0o5Yk1OLd5b0v96oPR8T6-FIQzW-1s1QI7kygc/edit?usp=sharing>

The University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education has compiled a national database of reopening plans which covers the largest school districts in the country, including several in Florida. Their data collection efforts at the national level motivated our Florida specific work. More on their work can be found here:

<https://www.crpe.org/current-research/covid-19-school-closures>

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