

Delayed Starts and Face Masks: Updates on Reopening Plans for Florida Schools

Policy Brief

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This policy brief provides updated evidence on Florida school districts' plans for the reopening of schools for the coming school year. Drawing on the second round of data collected as part of the UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida School Reopening Plans Database, this policy brief documents how reopening plans have changed from mid-July to the end of July. As of the last week of July, almost all districts in the state had publicly announced reopening plans, and a handful had been approved by the state. Masks were required at least part-time in about half of districts, a considerable jump from the 34% of districts that required masks in the earlier round of data collection. About half of districts had also announced plans to delay the start of the school year, and several had plans to begin the new school year entirely through remote learning. This is the second in a series of policy briefs that track reopening plans in Florida through the start of the 2020–21 school year.

Planning for the New School Year

Schools across the nation are rapidly approaching their regularly scheduled start to the new school year. Yet, in many locales, rates of new cases of COVID-19 remain high, challenging policymakers and educators to navigate a return to instruction while maintaining student and staff safety. This challenge has been particularly apparent in Florida. During July, Florida experienced one of the highest rates of new virus cases in the nation. Schools in Florida, however, have been directed by the state to develop reopening plans that allow for a return to in-person instruction.

The UF Education Policy Research Center has been tracking Florida school districts' reopening plans since the middle of July. This policy brief is the second in a series that documents the ways in which Florida school districts are preparing for reopening. The first brief, which detailed reopening plans as of mid-July, reported that nearly a quarter of school districts had yet to publicly release a reopening plan. Among those that had, around one in three had created a new digital option and all had existing virtual school options, allowing families to choose between in-person and remote instruction. At the time, about one in three districts had plans to

require masks at least part of the time, but only a handful of districts had taken steps to delay the start of school.

This follow-up policy brief provides updates on the status of reopening plans statewide as of the end of July (plans collected between July 22nd and 29th). While only a few weeks have passed between the original data collection and this first follow-up, a number of notable differences have emerged. This brief details significant changes in the percentage of districts with reopening plans, those planning to delay the start of the school year, and those requiring masks to be worn at school.

Reopening Plans are Public and Pending State Approval

School districts across the state were required to submit reopening plans to the state Department of Education for approval by July 31st. While at the time of the second round of data collection most districts had yet to receive approval from the state, the vast majority of districts had publicly released reopening plans via their school district website. Specifically, 97% of districts had reopening plans that could be publicly identified via their website. In comparison, in mid-July, only 72% of districts had posted reopening plans.

In addition to more districts releasing plans publicly, there was also an increase in detail among many school districts' reopening plans. Previously, some districts provided only short descriptions of the learning options available to parents and students for fall and plans for maintaining student health and safety. During this second round of data collection, many of these plans had been expanded, with greater details on learning options and steps the districts would be taking to minimize health risks.

97% of districts had communicated a reopening plan as of late July

While districts had until July 31st to submit plans to the state for approval, several districts had already garnered state approval of their plans as of late July. There were 17 districts with state-approved plans at the time of our data collection, and by July 31st the state had approved and posted at least 6 additional reopening plans. Plans continue to be approved. The state-approved plans are publicly available and accessible through the state Department of Education website.

Digital Options Remain Prominent and will be Sole Option for Some

As noted in the first policy brief, the majority of districts in Florida have developed new digital options for instruction, and all had existing virtual school options. As of the second round of data collection, 83% of districts with a reopening plan had developed a new digital instruction option. In most cases, this option will involve live “Zoom” sessions at regular times with teachers from the school districts. It is worth noting that even in districts without a new digital option, students across the state do have access to existing virtual school options both through their local school districts and the statewide Florida Virtual School.

While many districts are offering remote instruction as alternatives to in-person instruction, a handful of districts have opted for an entirely virtual start to the school year. For example, Broward County, Monroe County, and Palm Beach County will begin the 2020–21 school year

completely online, with no brick-and-mortar schooling. Other districts are actively considering a similar move. Districts starting in a remote format plan to reevaluate their reopening plans based on COVID-19 data as the school year progresses, with the goal of returning to in-person instruction as soon as it is safe to do so. For example, Monroe County has specified that it will revisit its reopening plan during the first week of September.

Delaying School Start Dates

As of the last week of July, 48% of school districts had announced a delayed first day of school for students. The delay ranged from one to two weeks in most cases, with many districts now due to begin the school year on August 24th. Several districts, however, will begin as late as August 31st, the last day allowable under state guidance. This marks a notable change from the data collected in mid-July, when less than 5% of districts had delayed the start of school. Some districts' school boards were actively considering a delayed start as of the last week of July, so it is likely that additional districts may also delay the start of the school year.

Districts varied in their methods of reconciling the delayed start date to the state requirement of 180 school days, or the equivalent in hours of instruction. Marion County, which delayed its first day of school to August 24th, will extend all early-release days to full school days in order to finish the school year in late May as previously planned. In contrast, Nassau County, which has also delayed its first day to August 24th, will keep early-release days throughout the school year and instead push the last day of school into early June.

Almost half of districts in Florida have delayed the start date for the new school year

Most of the districts that delayed the first day of school for students noted that teachers and administrators would still report to work as previously scheduled, so as to allow school staff more time to prepare and adjust both the campus and lesson plans for reopening before students arrive.

Mask Requirements are Increasing

When students do return to in-person schooling, the majority of students will find that they are required to wear masks at least part-time. As of the last week of July, over 20% of districts plan to require masks throughout the entire day and another 28% will require them situationally. For districts requiring masks only in certain situations, face mask requirements are most common in situations where social distancing is difficult, such as during hallway transitions and when students are entering and leaving the school campus. Only a few districts in the state plan to provide reusable masks for students and staff.



A number of districts with face covering requirements also included accommodations for individuals with disabilities that are unable to wear a mask. Additionally, some district plans also discussed responses if a student refuses to wear a mask in school. For example, in Citrus County, students that refuse to wear a mask may be sent home if not responsive to reminders. Such policies, while necessary for safety, highlight the types of new classroom management and discipline situations that many teachers and administrators will be tasked with addressing during the new school year as students adapt to new school rules and procedures.

Conclusions

The second round of data collection on school reopening plans in Florida demonstrates that districts have been actively responding to the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic. Almost all of the districts in the state have a plan in place for the coming school year, though most of these are awaiting final approval by the state. Districts appeared responsive to the increasing spread of the virus in the state, with more districts requiring masks, many districts choosing to delay the start of the school year, and several districts moving to entirely virtual starts to the academic year. The UF Education Policy Research Center will continue to track reopening plans through the approval of all district plans by the state and the start to the new school year.

Methodological Note

The data drawn on for this policy brief came from the UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida School Reopening Plans Database. This brief reports on the second round of data collected regarding district reopening plans. These plans were gathered between July 22nd and July 29th. Coding of reopening plans was based on publicly available information that could be readily found on school district websites. 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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