

# Time to Implement: Florida School Reopening Plans Meet the Start of the School Year

**Policy Brief**

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# Time to Implement: Florida School Reopening Plans Meet the Start of the School Year

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This policy brief provides updated evidence on Florida school districts' plans for the reopening of schools for the 2020 school year. Drawing on the third round of data collected as part of the UF Education Policy Research Center's Florida School Reopening Plans Database, this policy brief documents reopening plans as of the end of August 2020. By the end of August, all districts had a reopening plan, and many had already begun the new school year. Almost 9 out of 10 districts provided a new digital learning option, while several began the year entirely remote. About half of districts statewide described plans to provide technology and support for internet access for remote students. This brief considers how reopening plans position school districts to respond to potential future outbreaks of COVID this fall. This is the last in a series of policy briefs that have tracked Florida school reopening plans over the last two months.

## Schools Reopen

Over the past two months, the UF Education Policy Research Center has tracked the development of school reopening plans for all Florida school districts. As students across the state begin the new school year, these plans have now reached the implementation stage. Our comprehensive review of how reopening plans emerged, developed, and reached final approval by the state show a priority on providing choice to parents and students and leveraging technology to create new learning options for students.

In two prior briefs, we highlighted the new digital options available to students and the safety precautions, such as masks, used by districts. In this third and final brief, we consider the structures with which schools have opened the new school year, the efforts in place to ensure access to digital learning options, and considerations for how these structures and efforts may respond to future COVID-19 developments.

This final policy brief provides updates on the status of reopening plans statewide as of the end of August (plans collected between August 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>). While updating data from the first two briefs, this final brief adds new information on the availability of supports for technology provided by districts.

## Freedom to Choose

While Florida is among five states nationwide that have mandated that school districts provide in-person instruction, the state has provided flexibility for districts to provide choice to families and students. As a result, all students across the state have had the option of choosing from at least one remote alternative to in-person schooling, with the majority of students now having the choice between several remote learning options.

All students in the state have a remote learning option

Even before the pandemic interrupted brick-and-mortar schooling, all students in Florida had the option of enrolling in Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a state-run online public school, or in virtual schools associated with their local school district. In some cases, these district-managed virtual schools were franchisees of FLVS or offered through cooperative agreements between several school districts. Both FLVS and district virtual schools offer flexible schedules with minimal live instruction by a teacher, if any at all.

In the wake of COVID, however, districts began developing additional digital learning options that offer different benefits, such as the ability to participate in synchronous online classes with classmates and teachers from one's own school. As of late August, nearly 87% of districts had developed a new digital schooling option. This was an increase from the first data collection in mid-July, when 73% of districts that had communicated reopening plans had a new digital schooling option. This increase may have been caused by district responsiveness to stakeholder surveys indicating interest in remote learning options, as well as by the spike in COVID cases in Florida during this time period (see Figure 1).

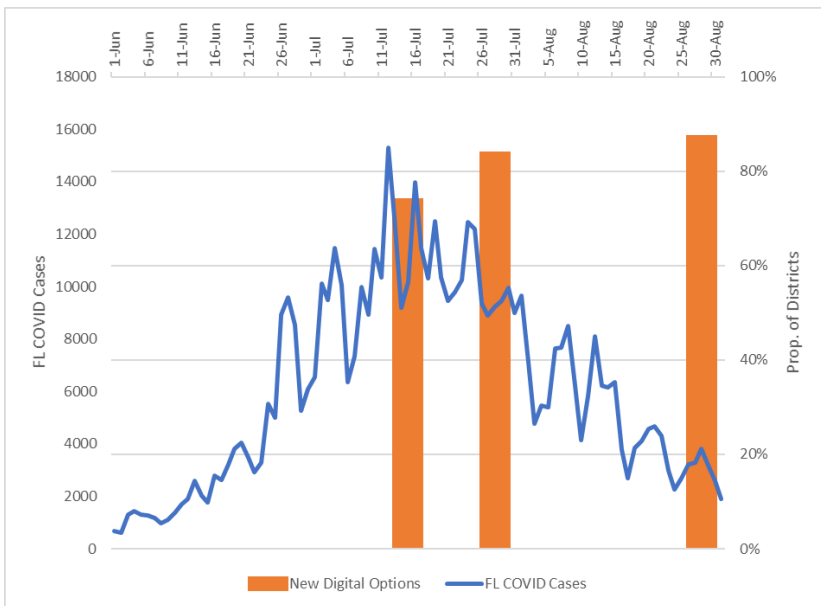


Figure 1. Proportion of districts with new digital options and new COVID cases in FL over time

While most districts in the state offered new digital options as an alternative choice to in-person instruction, several districts took advantage of the flexibility granted to districts by the state by

opting to begin the school year in an entirely remote format. For several districts, this remote start was intentionally short-lived, with plans to revisit the choice between in-person and remote instruction after only a few weeks.

## Bridging the Digital Divide

In returning to school this fall, districts had to address not only the need for cleaning/sanitation materials and protective equipment, but also the need for technology-related resources. Whether enrolling in virtual school or distance learning, many more students require electronic devices and internet access for the 2020-21 school year. Many school districts addressed the need for technology resources in their reopening plans.

By late August, 31% of district reopening plans noted they would provide an electronic device for all students who would like one, and another 25% of districts announced they would provide devices based on need. Of the districts providing devices, over half of them will provide devices 1:1, meaning one device per student.

About 56% of districts outlined plans for providing devices

Additionally, many districts recognized the need for ensuring student access to the internet. Overall, 42% of districts addressed internet access in their reopening plans, though they varied in specificity and method. Some districts put forth general statements that the district will work with families on obtaining internet. Other districts informed families about free hotspots available through providers like Xfinity. Still, other districts are equipping school buses with Wi-Fi devices in order to create mobile hotspots that can be stationed in various locations throughout the county.

## Time to Prepare for Fall

Of all the measures tracked in our data collection, delaying the first day of school was a response used by districts that saw one of the largest increases between mid-July and late August. As shown in Figure 2, by the end of August, at least 78% of districts statewide had delayed their start date.

Delayed starts provided schools with additional time to prepare for the coming year. Yet, only 61% of district plans provided clear descriptions of how they would respond to future outbreaks of COVID-19,

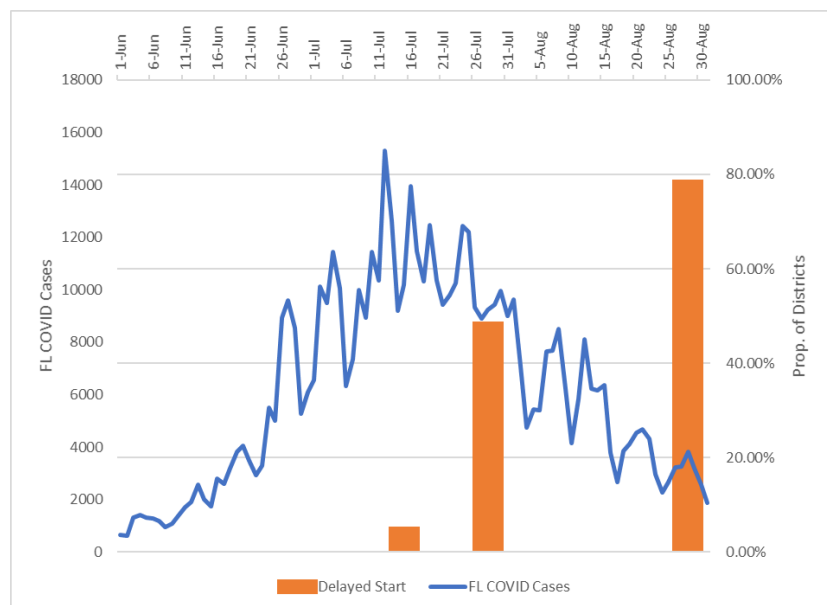


Figure 2. Proportion of districts with delayed starts and new COVID cases in FL over time



whether in their school or community—a percentage that is similar to that from mid-July.

That said, given that 87% of Florida school districts have a new digital learning option, if there is a rise in cases, many districts will be able to pivot to remote learning in response. For example, in Miami-Dade County, the district outlined various learning models in response to potential scenarios that may surface as the school year progresses, including a hybrid model, digital learning, and in-person instruction. After last spring, almost all students have now had experience with a remote learning model, potentially easing any needed transitions in the fall.

## Implications

School districts across the state have worked diligently this summer to develop comprehensive plans for a return to schooling in the fall. In the face of rapidly changing circumstances brought about by COVID, educational leaders have adapted plans over the last two months to meet the contextualized, local needs of their students. Despite the challenging circumstances, districts have developed plans that address access to learning, safety and health precautions, and the needs of various stakeholders.

Going forward, districts will need to continue to adapt to future changes in the pandemic's progression. We offer several recommendations here for relevant considerations as districts implement reopening plans and respond to future COVID developments.

- Develop clear response plans for future outbreaks of COVID if not already done.
- Prepare for movement of students between remote and in-person instructional modes, as well as the potential need to move to an entirely remote format if health conditions warrant.
- Address the digital divide by ensuring that students have adequate access to technology and internet.
- Ensure that the quality of instruction and learning experienced between in-person and remote students is equivalent.
- Focus specifically on issues of equity to ensure that existing disparities in achievement are not further exacerbated.

## 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 third round of data collected regarding district reopening plans. These plans were gathered between August 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. Coding of reopening plans was based on publicly available information that could be readily found on school district websites and in plans approved by the Florida Department of Education. Data on COVID-19 cases comes from the Google COVID Statistics and Wikipedia database. 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-1s1QI7kyqc/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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