

# More than crisis management: How Pittsburgh schools can be both quick and bold in taking on education in the time of COVID-19

Many challenges are ahead for the public school system in Pittsburgh and the entire country over the next 18 months. While government officials and community leaders now have better information regarding the risks of COVID-19 in a school setting than they had in March, there are still no definitive public health answers to crucial issues, including how to limit the spread of the virus in school settings, and whether opened schools will contribute to viral spread in the general population.

The severity of the budget cuts school districts, including Pittsburgh Public Schools, will face is also unclear, as well as how funding levels will affect a school's ability to operate during a pandemic. The Pennsylvania Association of Public School Officials estimated that even a 1.95 percent reduction of local tax revenue would translate to an \$8 million hit to PPS' annual budget.

The prospect of rolling out a new school year in the fall is also fraught with many logistical challenges, and school leaders will need to continue to act as calm and steady hands for students and families. But at the same time, education scholars and policy experts see the next 18 months as an unprecedented opportunity to show flexibility and meet the moment by thinking "outside the box."

Following are suggestions from leading advocates and policy experts in the field on how school leaders can respond to this moment with more than crisis management.

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communities have schools.”



## Expand and broaden engagement with families and the wider community

It's never been truer that public school educators must engage families early and often so communication flows both ways, policy experts said, even amidst so much uncertainty.

Hal Smith, senior vice president of education, youth development and health at the National Urban League, said that to do this, school leaders don't need advance knowledge of how things are going to look in the fall. District leaders can establish expectations of regular

## THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING TO REOPEN SCHOOLS IN THE FALL

1. Expand and broaden engagement with families and the wider community.
2. Protect high-needs students and marginalized groups amidst budget cuts.
3. Rethink what student participation and competency look like.
4. Create a comprehensive strategy for assessing teacher and student needs.

check-ins from families and provide parents and students with regular opportunities to communicate to school leaders as well. “That’s not difficult, you can do it now,” Smith said. “A monthly call, weekly call, however you’re going to do it.”

Since March, when many schools across the country closed their physical doors, some districts have gotten creative and aggressive about outreach to families outside campus. “Everything from going door to door, to check on families, to check on students, to reaching out multiple times a day” through Zoom or the phone, said Kimberly Smith, executive director of the League of Innovative Schools, a peer network of school districts established by the education nonprofit Digital Promise.

Districts also should be open and transparent about the difficult decisions they make when it comes to potential budget cuts due to shrinking tax revenues, said Allison Rose Socol, assistant director of P-12 policy at The Education Trust.

“The way [districts] respond to those budget shortfalls is going to have a huge impact, particularly on our most vulnerable students,” Socol said.

Partner organizations and local institutions can act as supports for school leaders in deploying resources and making sure families and students are engaged. The Vancouver School District in Washington State has grown this idea into a federally backed model. The district, which serves about 24,000 students, in June received a \$2.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand its family-community resource centers to eight more schools. Called “full-service community schools,” the model includes programming and services from partner organizations and agencies to support families experiencing poverty.

The resource centers help provide “health care, housing, transportation, food, clothing, hygiene items, and more, so it becomes a wraparound support within the district,” said Kimberly Smith. The school district is a member of the League of Innovative Schools. Smith said the district has been able to keep in close touch with families and students during the pandemic, and efficiently respond to their needs.

“Schools don’t have communities, communities have schools,” said Hal Smith, who also emphasized partnerships between schools and local institutions.



### **Protect high-needs students and marginalized groups amidst budget cuts**

District leaders have little influence on how much revenue they have to work with in a given year, but they will ultimately have to decide what will get cut and where.

To that end, national education policy experts emphasized the need to preserve and protect as many resources as possible for students with greater needs.

That means “avoiding uniform, need-blind approaches that just take away a certain percentage of funding” from each school without factoring in existing inequities, Socol said.

School programs and staff who serve English Language Learners, students with special needs and students from low-income families should be prioritized in the budget, Socol said.

Hal Smith said school leaders must put details behind their equity strategies as opposed to simply stating design principles as goals to strive for.

**Districts have been thinking differently about student engagement at a distance. What does that look like? How do you measure it?**

“Are you going to, as some mayors and others have suggested, ‘get back to the basics’, and things like equity and excellence go away?” Smith said. “That’s ridiculous. If that’s what you’re doing then you weren’t concerned that all children have access to a high-quality education in the first place.”

The Indianapolis School District’s board approved policies in June aimed at improving racial equity. Among the changes include a new requirement for the superintendent to provide regular reports on student performances by race, and a review of how disciplinary measures affect students along racial lines.

“This is a moment for districts to reassess what their policies are and the ways in which these policies target children of color,” Socol said.

Districts may have an opportunity now to implement restorative justice practices over disciplinary measures that have historically targeted students of color disproportionately.

Another member of the League of Innovative Schools, the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind have found ways to provide instructional support for parents overseeing their child’s work at home.

“Teachers are providing videos to parents on an ongoing basis so that parents can have background and context for what to do,” Kimberly Smith said.



### Rethink what student participation and competency look like

If attendance can’t simply be measured by taking the roll in the morning, policy experts said there is an opportunity to reframe what it means exactly for a student to show up and participate in learning.

“Clicking into a website doesn’t necessarily give us the best indication of learning and academic progress students made.”

“Districts have been thinking differently about student engagement at a distance,” Kimberly Smith said. “What does that look like? How do you measure it?”

Early research has warned of a staggering “COVID slide,” in which students have missed as much as half a year of academic progress by some estimates. In education circles, this is often called “learning loss.” Hal Smith said a more accurate term would be “instruction loss,” because whether kids are in the classroom or not they’re still learning something.

“These young people were learning all along, they’ve learned all kinds of things over the past three months,” Smith said, even if it wasn’t always through school-based instruction.

Instead of doubling or tripling down on English Arts or Math instruction, Smith encouraged school districts and families to think about a curriculum that gives students a chance to demonstrate their passions and the various ways they’ve grown as people in challenging times.

“If we’re going to spend an entire year on credit recovery or remediation, that is the exact wrong approach,” he said.

Instead, Hal Smith urged school leaders to consider more elective and creativity-based learning, not less of it.

If building closures or partial reopenings translate into a temporary waiving of compliance standards and reporting requirements, schools should take that new flexibility as an opportunity to use new evidenced-based solutions to status-quo problems, policy experts said.



### Create a comprehensive strategy for assessing teacher and student needs

As school districts across the country scrambled to equip students for online learning, Hal Smith said it's unlikely students who have lost that instruction time will catch up over the summer.

Students from low-income families, who are more likely to be obligated to work or be caretakers for siblings while their parents work, "don't have a lot of space for summer school, and for the kinds of approaches we saw from March until now," Smith said.

Smith and fellow staff at the National Urban League are urging education leaders on the state and local levels to offer effective professional development tools for teachers and staff, so they're armed with strategies to stay connected and engaged with students whether the school schedule is all in-person, entirely virtual, or a little of both.

"Whatever success we have from March until now was because young people were engaged with their same teacher from earlier in the year," Smith said. "That's not going to happen at the open of the school year, so where are those relationships and how are they fostered online?" Districts will need to draw feedback and data from teachers and students about what new tools and supports they need when more virtual learning is likely.

On the student side, Socol recommended some "low-stakes" diagnostic assessments that districts can use to find out where students are academically at the beginning of the school year.

"Clicking into a website doesn't necessarily give us the best indication of learning and academic progress students made," Socol said. "We're going to need a lot more information in order to target services and support."

Perhaps most importantly, policy experts agree that the challenges that COVID-19 poses to schools cannot lower expectations for students and what they can accomplish.

"We will want the expectation to be for preparing all students for college or a career choice and making college an option for all kids," Socol said. "We don't want to lose sight of that while schools are trying to catch up students."

And teachers will need as much support as possible to make sure those high expectations remain. Professional development for teachers must focus on strategies to develop virtual relationships with students now that there's time to rethink how students are gaining instruction online.

"I was seeing examples of Zoom calls for kindergarten, first, second and third graders that were three hours long," Hal Smith said. "That's ridiculous. And it was a decision made to really focus on getting as much instruction out there as possible, but it was not set up to be pedagogically correct."

Coaching for teachers is one of the most effective forms of professional development, according to Socol. "There are great models of online or virtual coaching that districts can learn from," she said. "You don't want to leave teachers to figure things out on their own."

"We have an opportunity to think differently," Hal Smith said. "I hope people take advantage of that."

## FURTHER READING

**Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement**  
[edworkingpapers.com/ai20-226](https://edworkingpapers.com/ai20-226)

**PA Association of School Business Officials estimates school districts could experience \$1 billion loss in local revenue in 2020-21**  
[pasbo.org/blog\\_home.asp?Display=122](https://pasbo.org/blog_home.asp?Display=122)

**National Urban League:** [nul.org](https://nul.org)  
**League of Innovative Schools:** [digitalpromise.org](https://digitalpromise.org)  
**The Education Trust:** [edtrust.org](https://edtrust.org)