

CORONAVIRUS

What Will Schools Do in the Fall? Here Are 4 Possible Scenarios

By Emily Tate

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As the current school year comes to a close, looking and functioning nothing like what any of us could have imagined mere months ago, another challenging school year looms ahead. Although nearly every U.S. state has begun, in varying degrees, to [reopen](#) businesses and relax lockdown restrictions, there is still little certainty—or consensus—as to what the future of education holds this fall.

In a [new guide](#) released today by the Washington, D.C.-based think tank [New America](#), the three authors—an instructional designer and two former teachers—lay out four possible scenarios for what school will look like in the 2020-21 school year, based on present understanding of the COVID-19 virus and [health experts' advice](#) for school re-openings.

For starters, the authors note that there is little reason to believe that a “normal” school year is within reach. In fact, the authors—Kristina Ishmael, senior project manager of the Teaching, Learning and Tech team at New America; Rebecca Heiser, a lead instructional designer at Pennsylvania State University’s World Campus; and Jennifer Payne, an educational technology coordinator at an online school in Colorado—hardly even considered a return to previous education arrangements in their projections.

This is in part because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released [guidance](#) advising schools to refrain from re-opening until they are able to screen students and staff for COVID-19 symptoms or exposure to anyone with symptoms, and until they can protect students and staff who are considered high risk, should they become infected.

All four scenarios laid out in the New America guide are predicated on the idea that distance learning will, in some way, be folded into every school's plans for the coming year.

Also underpinning these various scenarios is the critical need for professional learning and development over the summer.

What has taken place during the last two-and-a-half months, the authors contend, is "crisis distance learning," brought on by near-ubiquitous restrictions on movement and stay-at-home orders since March. "The spectrum of crisis distance learning ranged from 'drive-by' course material pickups to telephone check-ins to haphazard online lesson plans and ad-hoc video conferences, all of which can be considered a low-fidelity migration to support continuity," the authors write.

School staff should use the summer break to pause and catch their breath, and re-evaluate how they approached distance learning this spring. Administrators should take the time to invest in their staff, ensuring that everyone is on the same page and creating a fluid, on-the-fly plan for transitioning from face-to-face instruction to distance learning in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak during the school year, the report suggests. The summer is also an opportunity for educators to improve the quality of their remote instruction, in the event they must teach remotely again.

Below are summaries of the four scenarios the authors lay out. As they write, "none are perfect solutions—each has its own set of challenges and drawbacks and we recognize that each district is approaching this from different contexts, depending on levels of funding, resources and support up to now."

1. Brick to Click Learning

The gist: The school district will begin the academic year with traditional, in-person classes, but will have planned and prepared for an outbreak that causes the school community to transition swiftly to distance learning.

The details: Over the summer, teachers will receive training in delivering online learning and will be flexible and able to transfer their in-person instruction to an online environment. The likelihood of another outbreak is "relatively high," so staff will need to move quickly. "For example, if the number of cases jumps quickly mid-week, the district would send home instructional materials within 48 hours and then continue learning online the following week," the report describes. "This scenario requires all educators, support staff, students, parents, and caregivers to remain

nimble in the likelihood that there are quick changes in the way learning is accessed.”

2. Click to Brick Learning

The gist: The school district will continue online learning in the fall, monitoring public health benchmarks and communicating with local government and health personnel to determine when it is safe to return to brick-and-mortar classrooms.

The details: Over the summer, teachers will receive training in delivering online learning. All academic content will be taught online for the duration of the school year. Any potential reopening will prioritize not instruction but advising and relationship building.

Should the school re-open to allow for face-to-face interactions, students can expect to come for half days or every other day, to adhere to existing social distancing guidelines. In this scenario, school staff will need to take special care to account for students’ mental health, technical problems, social-emotional needs and individualized support services. They will also need “to consider online learning the primary method of working towards competency in a grade level and/or content area, while in-person learning is focused on relationship-building and developing non-academic skills.”

3. Blended learning

The gist: The school district will offer a hybrid learning environment, in which both face-to-face instruction and online instruction are provided in a consistent, easy-to-follow schedule throughout the year.

The details: Over the summer, teachers will receive training in delivering blended learning. The school will choose from one of several blended learning models. One possible route would be to offer in-person instruction one day a week and online learning the rest. Younger students, who need more assistance and supervision, may need to attend in-person classes more frequently than older students. This scenario, while asking the community to use both online and in-person learning simultaneously, would make a school well-positioned to respond to a COVID-19 outbreak, as it could quickly move to full-time online learning.

4. Online learning

The gist: The school district will provide all instruction, programming and support services remotely so as to best protect the health and safety of students and staff.

The details: Over the summer, teachers will need at least 80 additional hours of professional development to prepare adequately for an entire year of online teaching. Technological infrastructure should be scaled and secured, as necessary, and communication technologies should be used to

their full advantage “to pay close attention to the development of each child and ensure that appropriate grade-level growth is happening while learning takes place at a distance.” This scenario is most appropriate—or perhaps only appropriate—for middle and high school students, since younger students would need an adult at home, which can create complications for working parents.

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