

Seven steps to sending elementary kids back to school and parents back to work

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All over the country, states, districts, and task forces of every sort are wrestling with the question of how to safely reopen schools. This scenario planning is daunting, as schools must navigate a minefield of health, safety, legal, and instructional issues, and do so blindfolded by our ever-changing yet imperfect understanding of the virus itself. The AEI "[blueprint for back to school](#)" does an excellent job spelling out the major considerations that leaders must take into account, but stops short of providing specific advice.

With the hope of moving the conversation forward a bit more, here's my attempt to do that for **elementary schools**, informed by some of the country's leading educators, and [lessons from "early re-openers" around the globe](#). I'll consider how social-distancing might look, how schedules might work, and other logistical questions currently keeping leaders up at night.

First, though, let me be clear about the assumptions driving these suggestions.

- I assume that the goal of social distancing measures in schools is to mitigate the spread of the virus—and avoid any "super spreader" events—not to reduce to zero the [risk of transmission](#). Even if local communities are not experiencing major outbreaks, the virus will still be out there, and will likely find its way into some schools. The goal, then, is to keep any contagion to a minimum, while protecting those children and adults who are most vulnerable.

That has important implications for local policies. Most significantly, it means that students, educators, and family members who are at risk of serious illness or worse must not be put in harm's way—so learning (and teaching) from home full-time must remain an option. It also means designing approaches that keep kids with the same group of peers at all times, and to avoid mixing groups together.

- I assume that we cannot ignore the economic imperative of allowing parents to go back to work—which is important in its own right and will help children by alleviating poverty. Thus, plans that require young children to remain at home during the traditional school day (every other day or in mornings or afternoons) are non-starters, though remaining at home must remain an option.
- I assume that plans must be affordable. While additional resources would create new possibilities for coping with this crisis, the political appetite for that appears to be slim to none. In fact, schools will probably have to find ways to practice "social distancing" while also coping with major budget cuts, as outrageous and unfair as that might be.

With those three assumptions in mind, here are seven steps toward the successful re-opening of elementary schools:

1. **Give students and educators the choice of full-time remote learning for the 2020-21 school year.** This is a moral and legal imperative, as some children, families, and educators have underlying health conditions that put them at high risk of serious illness or worse from Covid-19.

Plus, some families will simply feel more comfortable keeping their kids quarantined until there is a vaccine, or may prefer the remote learning model to the in-person variety, especially given the modifications that will be necessary. And the more students that stay home, the easier it will be to implement social-distancing for the others.

Most school systems will likely want to organize these “online schools” themselves, with their stay-at-home teachers instructing their stay-at-home students, but they might consider outsourcing some or all of this function to online learning providers.

Making the full-time online learning program as attractive and educationally effective as possible should be priority number one for most schools and systems, as it makes every aspect of social distancing more doable. The sooner parents make these decisions, the better. Schools might also consider whether to let families reconsider their decisions after the end of the first quarter or semester.

- 2. Shift to an every-other-day schedule for fourth and fifth graders, while allowing Kindergarten through third graders to attend school every weekday.** Younger students cannot be left at home alone, so they need to be at school if their parents or other caregivers are going to be able to go to work. Plus, given their maturity level and limited reading skills, they are least equipped to learn much independently. (See #3 for how grades K-3 could attend daily and still do social distancing.)

While it’s hardly ideal, fourth and fifth graders can do some independent work and can be left at home during the school day; an alternating schedule will allow for social distancing on school buses and in classrooms.

If schools or parents are concerned that fourth and fifth graders are too young to be left at home alone, and elementary schools don’t have enough extra spaces to allow for social distancing, then school systems might consider using middle schools or high schools to house fourth and fifth grade classrooms (maybe third grade, too). That would of course mean making the middle schoolers or high schoolers stay home more often, going to an every-third-day-at-school schedule, perhaps, instead of alternate days. But as [other organizations](#) and [analysts](#) have written, getting younger children back to school on a regular basis should be a top priority.

- 3. Keep all classrooms to fifty percent capacity, and don’t allow student groups to mix.** This is where each school will have to work out its own logistical puzzle. The first key factor (as mentioned in #1) is how many students continue with full-time remote learning. The more who do, the easier this challenge becomes. The second is the physical layout of the elementary school; how many classrooms or other spaces are available that would allow for groups of ten to twelve students, and an adult, to maintain social distance? (Including gyms and/or cafeterias that could be subdivided, plus art and music rooms.) The third is the school’s staffing model; how many instructional staff beyond classroom teachers work at the school? Or could be hired, so as to oversee groups of students when their classroom teachers are with the other half of the class? Are volunteers available?

Note that not allowing students to mix means having lunch in classrooms, and spreading recess out over the course of the entire day (rather than, say, having all third graders on the playground at the same time). It also means cancelling field trips, assemblies, and other large-group events.

4. **Run buses at fifty percent capacity or less.** If lots of families choose the full-time online option, and fourth and fifth graders attend school every other day, this should be doable. But schools may want to encourage parents to consider walking, biking, or driving their kids to school, too, at least in communities where that is feasible. If that still doesn't do the trick, systems might consider allocating more buses to elementary schools than usual, given the imperative of allowing young children to attend school every day so their parents can work. Or they might stagger start and end times every day.
5. **Mask up, wash those hands, and tell everyone to stay home if sick!** The evidence is mounting that masks can significantly reduce the spread of the coronavirus. And making little kids wear masks is more likely to succeed than keeping them at least six feet apart from one other; schools should start looking for manufactured or home-made masks for students who need them. Frequent hand washing is also critical, and will need to be managed tightly so that restrooms don't become a source of contagion. That means setting a strict schedule for bathroom breaks for every class, and sticking to it. Schools might schedule hourly "hand sanitizer" breaks, too. And needless to say, schools should have a zero tolerance policy about coming to school with any sort of illness.
6. **Use a mix of "man to man" and "zone coverage" when it comes to teaching.** As mentioned above, children should be in the same group of 10 or 12 students at all times. (Except when they are on the bus.) And they should stay in the same physical location at all times, too, except for recess. Teachers and other staff, meanwhile, should circulate so as to provide the necessary instruction to students. (But they must be extremely careful to maintain social distance to avoid circulating the virus themselves!)

Here's how it could work for grades K-3, whose students attend school daily: Classroom teachers would be in charge of two groups of students (again, of 10 to 12 kids each) and split their time half and half. Most likely it makes sense for them to use that time on English language arts and math. When students aren't with their classroom teachers, they should be with the "specials" teachers (art, music, physical education, media, etc.) or in a computer lab setting, or at recess, overseen by an instructional aide or other staffer or volunteer. [you ignore the many pluses of team teaching under this]

For grades four and five, whose students attend school every other day, the set-up is somewhat easier. When they are in school, students' days will be relatively "normal," as they'll spend most of their time with their classroom teacher. They will have one to two "specials" a day, at which point classroom teachers could check in online with their at-home students, plan lessons, and grade student assignments. But when students are at home they will mostly work independently.

See Figure 1 for an example of how the schedule might work.

7. **Have a clear plan ready to go if an outbreak occurs.** If these suggestions are implemented with fidelity, it should significantly reduce the risk of a “super-spreader” event. But it won’t eliminate the possibility of a student or staff member bringing the virus to school and infecting others.

If someone in the school community tests positive for Covid-19, public health officials will likely require the school to close for deep cleaning. Students or staff who have come in contact with the infected person will also be quarantined at home. Thanks to the social distancing measures, it should be a relatively small number of people who need to do this, not the whole school. Still, local public health officials may want the school closed for two weeks or longer—especially if there’s a flare-up in the larger community—so schools need to be prepared to go back to fulltime online learning for everyone. For better or worse, that’s something they now have a lot of experience with!

These seven steps are not the Ten Commandments. As we learn more about the virus and good ideas evolve from schools, systems, and other sources, we will update these accordingly. Don’t hesitate to offer your feedback by emailing thegadfly [at] fordhaminstitute [dot] org or by tweeting @michaelpetrilli.

Figure 1: Weekly Schedules for Lincoln Elementary School

Lincoln Elementary is a Title I school with 600 students in grades K-5. In a typical year, it has four classrooms per grade with 23-27 students each, for a total of 24 classrooms (and thus 24 classroom teachers). It also has three “specials” teachers (music, art, and physical education); three special-education teachers or specialists; two ELL teachers; one counselor; one media specialist; eight instructional aides; two front-office staff; and a principal and assistant principal. (Plus cafeteria, maintenance, and cleaning staff.)

We will assume that one-third of its students opt for full-time remote learning for the 2020-21 school year, and four teachers and three staff also choose to stay remote for health reasons. So now the school has 400 students to serve in-person (K-3 attending every day, grades 4-5 attending every other day), spread across 20 classroom teachers. Here are some sample schedules showing how this might work.

Weekly Schedule for Mrs. Smith's Second Grade Class, Group 1

Remember: second graders attend school every day

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM block 1 (9:00 – 10:15)	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Smith)	Math (with Mrs. Smith)	Physical education, then recess (with PE teacher)	Recess, then computer time (with instructional aide)	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Smith)
AM block 2 (10:15 – 11:30)	Recess, then computer time (with instructional aide)	Music and science (with music teacher)	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Smith)	Math (with Mrs. Smith)	Recess, then computer time (with instructional aide)
Lunch block (11:30 – 12:30)	Lunch (with instructional aide)	Lunch (with principal)	Lunch (with ELL teacher)	Lunch (with special education teacher)	Lunch (with vice principal)
PM block 1 (12:30 – 1:45)	Math (with Mrs. Smith)	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Smith)	Math (with Mrs. Smith)	Recess, then computer time (with instructional aide)	Math (with Mrs. Smith)
PM block 2 (1:45 – 3:00)	Art and social studies (with art teacher)	Recess, then computer time (with instructional aide)	Social studies and SEL (with school counselor)	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Smith)	Science and story time (with media specialist)

Note: Mrs. Smith is working with either Group 1 or Group 2 at all times, except during her one-hour lunch and planning break. Group 1 stays in Mrs. Smith's classrooms at all times, save for recess. Group 2 uses the school's music room.

Weekly Schedule for Mrs. Johnson's Fifth Grade Class, Group 1

Remember: Fifth graders attend school every other day

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM block 1 (9:00 – 10:15)	Independent work at home	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Johnson)	Independent work at home	English Language Arts (with Mrs. Johnson)	Independent work at home
AM block 2 (10:15 – 11:30)	Zoom class check-in (with Mrs. Johnson)	Music and science (with music teacher)	Zoom check-in (with Mrs. Johnson)	Art and social studies (with art teacher)	Zoom check-in (with Mrs. Johnson)
Lunch block (11:30 – 12:30)	Independent work at home	Lunch (with instructional aide)	Independent work at home	Lunch (with media specialist)	Independent work at home
PM block 1 (12:30 – 1:45)	Independent work at home	Math (with Mrs. Johnson)	Independent work at home	Math (with Mrs. Johnson)	Independent work at home
PM block 2 (1:45 – 3:00)	Independent work at home	Physical education, then recess (with PE teacher)	Independent work at home	SEL, then recess (with school counselor)	Independent work at home

Note: Mrs. Johnson spends two blocks a day providing instruction to her in-school students (one ELA, one math), another block providing instruction over Zoom to her at-home students, and another block is spent planning and providing feedback on student work. When her students are at school, they remain in her classroom at all times, save for recess.