



NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER
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Strong Schools for All: A Plan Forward for New York City



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

Dear Fellow Parents,

There is no more critical operational task facing City government right now than reopening schools safely. Yet despite having convened a 45-person advisory council, and the traditional school year beginning in just 65 days, the Mayor and the Schools Chancellor have provided few if any details on how they intend to do so in a manner that is safe for students and staff alike.

In an effort to accelerate the process, my team and I have worked with experts in the field to develop this comprehensive set of proposals to:

- Ensure the safety for students and educators, based on the latest scientific guidance;
- Reopen schools with as much in-person instruction as possible;
- Provide transparency about transmission status within school communities; and
- Improve the quality of any remote instruction that remains necessary.

The remote instruction system the Department of Education put in place in the final few months of the 2019-2020 school year was understandably makeshift, and our city's teachers put forth a herculean effort to make the best of it for their students. With my two sons in public school, my wife, Elyse, and I dealt first-hand with some of the challenges.

For many, particularly families and students of color facing deep trauma stemming from the illness and loss caused by COVID-19, it was far worse. As a parent, I am deeply concerned that if families again face a makeshift approach, with little in-person instruction in the fall of 2020, the educational losses, social-emotional harm, and economic hardship could be immense.

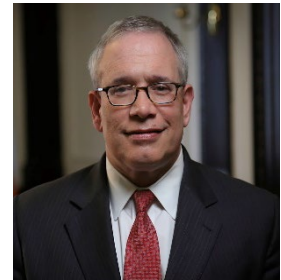
As City Comptroller, I know that any potential planning failures by the Department of Education will mean significant economic downside for the city: in the short term, from parents being unable to work and, in some cases, from families — and not just the privileged — leaving the city for places that are more successful in safely restoring in-person instruction; and, in the long term, from our students being less prepared for success.

When September comes, what is certain is that there will be no return to 'normal' in New York City's public schools. Many schools are crowded places where children and teachers frequently come into close contact with one another. Clearly, for school to reopen, many beloved routines of school life will need to be radically transformed to prioritize the health and safety of children, families, and school communities.

What follows are my proposals to achieve that transformation in a way that best serves the 1.1 million public school children of New York City, based on the latest but still evolving information.

Sincerely,

Scott Stringer





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Re-Opening NYC Schools in the Age of COVID-19

New York City's public schools have always been key pillars of our city and our nation – indeed, 1 out of every 300 Americans *is* a New York City public school student, making it by far the largest educational enterprise in the country and a significant chunk of our nation's population. That said, our school system is in fact a network of communities, each with its own character and set of challenges, and each tested like never before by the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic forced the closure of all city schools on March 16th, 2020, separating students from friends, teachers, sports and afterschool clubs. For some, especially among students of color, the loss of routines has been compounded by deep trauma stemming from the illness and loss caused by COVID-19, which will make a return to school that much more challenging. But failure is not an option – not when the health, well-being and education of 1.1 million students are at stake.

The task of planning for the reopening of the largest school district in the nation after months of such upheaval is daunting and deserves careful planning, not just as it pertains to education, but to the City's economy as well. Without school, there can be no real return to work for the thousands of families who rely on our school system as a way to care for and educate their children. Schools also play a fundamental role in the health and safety of children, in supporting the development of social/emotional skills, and providing nutritious meals, a safe environment, and physical and mental health services. As noted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, all policy considerations for the coming school year should “start with a goal of having students physically present in schools.”¹ Critical to this goal is an “all hands on deck” approach to addressing the challenges that lie ahead for schools and classrooms, while remaining nimble enough to shift as the course of the pandemic evolves.

When September comes, what is certain is that there will be no return to ‘normal’ in New York City's public schools. Many schools are crowded places where children and teachers frequently come into close contact with one another. Clearly, for school to reopen, many beloved routines of school life will need to be radically transformed to prioritize the health and safety of children, families, and school communities.

This policy briefing, by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer, has a two-fold purpose. First, it offers practical recommendations for safely reopening schools based on current public health recommendations and the latest scientifically-informed evidence. Secondly, it presents a broader vision for how to provide strong instruction to all students and address both long-standing learning gaps and new disparities as a result of COVID-19.

To date, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has offered little official guidance on what school will look like in the fall.² At the same time, families across the City are yearning for details on new health protocols that might be instituted, new schedules that might be required, how remote learning will be handled and myriad other questions. While it is certainly understandable that the work of reopening schools is complex and requires care, at a minimum the Department of Education should move swiftly to communicate with families a plan to ensure that no matter what form it takes in the fall, education in New York City will be challenging, rigorous, and equitable for all students. Of course, it is also vital that the U.S. Senate step up and pass the HEROES Act, which would provide more than \$90 billion for the nation's schools. But federal inaction should not be an excuse for the DOE to stand still.

Prior to the spread of coronavirus, many students in New York City faced conditions in their homes or neighborhoods that cast a dark shadow on their ability to learn and succeed in school. Trauma is real, and it affects one half to two-thirds of children in classrooms nationwide.³ One in ten children is homeless, and three quarters qualify for free lunch, the national signifier of childhood economic need. Such conditions present a difficult reality for student academic success, and one that is borne out, unfortunately, in the numbers: more than 70 percent of our 4th graders struggle to read proficiently.⁴ The COVID-19 virus and the changes it has wrought have only served to compound these disparities.

Numerous experts are now engaged in how to reopen schools safely. The Mayor has appointed a 45-person education advisory council to provide guidance on reopening schools safely. The Governor has convened the “Reimagine New York” advisory council tasked with helping districts improve the education experience for teachers and students when schools reopen. Additionally, leading policy think tanks, labor unions, and education advocates have issued blueprints for reopening schools and guidance for addressing learning disparities when schools reopen. Any guidance for City schools, however, must include a commitment to flexibility. What works in one school building or community may not be suitable for another given New York City's vast size, so there must be latitude for schools to design programs according to their school community's unique needs. Of course, any plans must also adapt to changing circumstances involving the virus' prevalence as well as to the latest scientific guidance on how to ensure the safety of individuals and communities.

This report offers a range of ideas pertinent to all those discussions and is founded on the notion that underlying any plan to reopen schools and reinvigorate classrooms and learning, the Department of Education needs to lay a firm foundation of trust with families and school communities which can be built through a commitment to the following principles:

- **The safety and protection of everyone in the school community.**

- **Effective and transparent communication about current virus transmission status within school communities; and**
- **Commitment to supportive, high quality instruction, with clear guidance about instructional standards for remote instruction.**

On top of these principles is the very real prospect that until there is a vaccine, New York City may well face future spikes in community transmission that will require future school closures, possibly as soon as this fall or winter. Schools should have educational plans in place now to continue and improve remote learning in the months and years ahead. This means assurances from the DOE that if students are learning remotely, there will be a baseline of live, synchronous instruction and student participation as well as attendance monitoring and grading.

The following recommendations offer guidance to help attain two larger goals: safe and healthy school communities, and high-quality instruction to support learning and address disparities.



Recommendations for Reopening Schools Safely

Before any decisions are made about opening schools, there first must be an established understanding that safety comes first. Schools can only open if the right protocols and safety procedures have been agreed upon – by the Department of Education in consultation with public health experts, partners in labor, and parents – and there is a clear strategy to effectively implement them. The decision to reopen schools must rest upon scientific and medical knowledge -- knowledge that is rapidly evolving as more is learned about the ability to contain the virus. Additionally, assuming public health conditions continue to improve and officials move forward with planning for opening schools, these plans will need to include periodic quality reviews to ensure protocols are being followed and that swift actions will be taken to redress any areas that are lacking.

Furthermore, whatever safety protocols are adopted, whether the ones listed here or others, the Department of Education should ensure that rigorous implementation is maintained throughout every school, and that any divergence is immediately addressed. Schools should be provided with guidance about how to periodically review safety procedures and cleaning plans. Additionally, it may be useful for individual school communities to appoint a health safety director, charged with reviewing and raising up to DOE any complaints about the health environment of school buildings, and monitoring health safety protocol implementation according to evolving public health guidance.

While there is much speculation about how to keep schools safe in the fall, it is comforting to recognize that New York City has *already established* a strong precedent for safely caring for students in school settings during the pandemic – namely, the enrollment over 10,000 children of essential workers across 93 school sites in the city.⁵ By grouping students in small cohorts or “pods” and effectively layering multiple measures of protection -- including six feet distancing between students, regular cleanings, daily temperature checks and mask wearing -- the DOE has continued to run these Regional Enrichment Centers with no reported outbreaks.⁶ In other states and localities that have issued guidance for reopening schools, the emphasis is similarly on the consistent use of several preventative measures used in combination including: masks or face coverings, physical distancing, hand hygiene, cleaning high contact surfaces, testing, and good ventilation or increased use of outdoor settings.⁷ This “layered” approach to safety is critical to understanding how schools can best be kept safe, and should include the following measures in New York City going forward:



Require consistent use of masks or face coverings for students and staff

Research has confirmed that COVID-19 transmission is respiratory, and masks or other face coverings have been identified as a significant and critical component in reducing transmission.^{8,9,10} While the use of masks has become a politically contentious issue nationwide, in states that have mandated face coverings in public, infection rates have declined significantly.¹¹ In New York City, mask usage has largely become an accepted standard, with associated positive trends in COVID-19 infection rates.

Students in second grade and older should be required to wear a mask or face covering for their nose and mouth. In New York State, all children over the age of two are subject to Governor's mandate concerning covering the nose and mouth with a mask when in public and unable to maintain social distance. In a school setting, children in early elementary school – kindergarten and first grades – may be too young to wear masks properly, so face shields could be considered as an appropriate face covering for this age group, as well as for children with medical or other needs that would make wearing a face mask while in the classroom challenging. All adults in the building should also be required to wear masks. Again, some type of face shield or transparent mask may be best for teachers working with groups of students who are deaf, hard of hearing, or rely on visual cues.

To ease the challenge of requiring children to wear masks consistently, deliberate and planned mask breaks could be built into each day.¹² Breaks from wearing masks should occur only when children are outside or in a well-ventilated space and can maintain six feet distance from others.

Mandate physical distancing

Strong evidence suggests that maintaining distance from others is an important strategy for slowing the virus.¹³ While current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend a distance of six feet between individuals, there is no exact threshold for safety and many other nations have recommended a distance of one meter, or approximately three feet, between children in a school setting. Three feet is also the threshold recommended by the World Health Organization.¹⁴

While physical distancing has shown to be effective – especially when part of a layered prevention strategy – it is arguably the most burdensome for schools. To maintain proper distance between students requires many schools, particularly overcrowded ones, to stagger schedules and further limit in-classroom instruction for the coming year. For now, the DOE should abide by CDC guidelines but continue to monitor best practices around physical distancing, which seem likely to evolve as more evidence is gathered around how best to safeguard students and staff alike in classroom settings.

Establish consistent, small cohorts of students

When students are grouped in small, consistent cohorts each day, the number of students potentially exposed to someone infected with COVID-19 is lessened.

These groups of students remain together throughout the day in the same classroom or other designated area of the building as much as feasible, with teachers, rather than the students, changing locations. The size of cohorts would likely be dependent on the individual capacities in each school building to maintain adequate physical distancing, although given the space constraints of most New York City classrooms it is expected that smaller cohorts of 10 to 12 students will be the “new normal” for city classrooms. Keeping students in clustered cohorts becomes increasingly challenging in older grades as students transition into more departmentalized instruction. Yet, evidence based on modeling shows that limiting groupings is associated with a decreased exposure or infection.¹⁵

Of course, shifting to a model that allows for no more than 10 to 12 students per classroom – in a system where classes of 30 or more students was not uncommon pre-COVID – will require a significant investments in new teaching staff, as will be discussed later in this report.

Provide pooled testing, aggressive contact tracing and daily temperature scans

The health and safety of teachers and students is a critical concern. Universal testing for all NYC students and school staff will be necessary before the start of school. Now that the City has increased testing capacity, there should be testing locations at every school, providing free testing for students, families, and school staff

prior to the first day of school. Such testing must be a pre-requisite for attending school in-person.

To continue to test the student body at regular intervals throughout the school year, the DOE could employ pooled testing. In this method, a nasal swab or saliva sample is taken from every student and then pooled with other samples from the cohort and processed as a single test. If the pool shows a positive result, the individual samples are processed and can be traced back to the infected student. This is a more efficient method for processing samples from a large population and more cost effective than testing individual samples. The FDA is currently developing new guidelines to facilitate pooled testing and the City should seize the opportunity to experiment with the technique when permitted.¹⁶

The DOE must establish a transparent protocol for contact tracing within school communities to quickly identify and contain any outbreaks. If someone in a school community – including immediate family members of students or staff - has been infected, the Department of Education should be transparent in notifying the community and take swift action to contain and provide care to that individual, in accordance with the most recent guidance of health experts, and initiate strict site cleaning protocols.

Current public health guidance recommends temperature scanning or symptom checking prior to entering any school building.¹⁷ At a minimum, individuals who self-report a temperature above 100.3 degrees Fahrenheit or other flu-like symptoms can be isolated, sent home, or directed to medical treatment. DOE will also need to have specific, transparent benchmarks that will trigger the closure of schools and that are aligned with public health guidelines.

Every school must have a full-time nurse on staff

The global pandemic revealed the depth of public health need in city schools: as many as 70,000 students attend a school that lacks a school nurse.¹⁸ **At a time of acute concern over the health of every child, this is not acceptable, and the DOE must move aggressively to ensure that every school building has a full-time nurse on staff.** Hundreds of schools rely on temporary staffing to cover nursing slots. Without permanent positions, these temporary nurses are not allowed access to students' medical records and history. While the nursing shortage in New York City partially reflects national trends, the urgency of the current health crisis necessitates immediate action.

The local nursing shortage in schools is partially caused by salary disparities: school nurses hired by the Department of Education are paid more than school nurses hired by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Long term, the City must provide salary and benefit parity for nurses employed by either agency. The City should also begin

aggressive recruitment of school nursing staff, including a hiring pipeline through nursing colleges and programs in New York City institutions of higher education.¹⁹

Invest in enhanced cleanings and the latest technologies

The CDC has already advised that students remain six feet apart while in school, which will be a serious challenge in many of the city’s most crowded schools. The City should have transparent and stepped-up cleaning protocols for every school building.

Further, the DOE should begin immediately to explore ways to prevent classroom surfaces from becoming infection points through the use of non-toxic, spray-on agents, or other new technologies that are proving effective in combatting the COVID-19 virus.²⁰ And of course, every building needs to be well-stocked with soap, disinfectant wipes, and hand sanitizer.

Attention must also be paid to the lack of air flow in basement areas and other windowless sections of school buildings. Each school has a different capacity to configure classrooms and other spaces so that adequate social distancing is maintained. But for some schools, spaces that have previously been used as classroom spaces may not be safe for preventing virus transmission. Rooms lacking windows or with otherwise poor air circulation are not ideal.²¹ Even with the most stringent social distancing precautions, germs from a sick individual in a room with poor air flow are likely to spread.

Repurpose available spaces and identify outdoor spaces for learning activities

As the City conducts a thorough inventory of classroom, cafeteria and gymnasium space in every school building, there should also be consideration given to repurposing other available spaces outside of school facilities to support classroom needs, including vacated office buildings and underused shared work spaces.²² In school communities where significant classroom reconfiguring will be needed, DOE should notify families of any potential upcoming changes in building location.

Outdoor settings are increasingly seen as having lower risk for transmission of COVID-19, compared with indoor spaces.²³ Holding classes outdoors may be feasible for some schools with courtyards, school yards or parking lots, weather permitting. Some classes could locate to nearby parks or other outdoor areas within walking distance. Of course, outdoor learning is not possible every school, and considerations would need to be made to ensure accessibility. However, given the benefits of the outdoor environment, the City could consider ways to identify available spaces and address any challenges to their use, including communication with students and families about outdoor learning activities.

Prioritize social-emotional learning, and ensure every school has a full-time social worker and guidance counsellor

Many students whose lives and families have been impacted by COVID-19 have experienced serious emotional trauma, particularly those who had significant mental health needs prior to the pandemic disruption. When schools reopen, it will be critical to ensure that robust mental health services are in place across all schools, and that there is a rich continuum of supports available specifically for students with significant mental health needs. Such supports should be distinct from mental health consultations or trainings for school staff; rather, schools need access to boots-on-the ground mental health professionals who can provide direct, integrated, trauma-sensitive support to students experiencing emotional or behavioral crises. **Specifically, at a minimum every school must have a full-time social worker and guidance counselor on staff.** When students return to classrooms, it is urgent that schools avoid traumatic interventions from EMS or NYPD – which are currently disproportionately called upon to respond to children in emotional distress who are Black or Latinx.²⁴

As students have witnessed the devastating impact of police brutality on communities of color, many are awakening to their own raw emotions about social injustice and abusive and discriminatory practices of law enforcement. To best support students in the midst of social upheaval, schools must be safe places, where no student will be unfairly targeted by police. To that end, the DOE should begin robust training for school safety staff in culturally responsive and sustaining education (CR-SE). This can allow for a more successful realignment of the role of safety agents, to better reflect the values of safe and supportive school communities. Teachers should also be given clear examples of how to incorporate CR-SE and social emotional learning in lessons this fall, whether in classrooms or virtually.²⁵

Additionally, a school Mental Health Continuum would enable a team of clinicians to work with students and staff to coordinate with schools and enhance their capacity to respond to students in crisis, and provide direct mental health support to students and families as needed. This model was first developed and proposed by the Mayor's Leadership Team on School Climate in 2016 but never adopted.²⁶ It has never been more critical for integrated investments in school mental health and to avoid exacerbating the damage and trauma from the public health crisis.

Make accommodations for high-risk teachers, administrators, and other school staff

The DOE has indicated that as many as 20 percent of teachers may need to work remotely at the start of the school year, because they are at higher risk for complications

from COVID-19.²⁷ This includes educators who are older or those with pre-existing conditions such as cancer or being immunocompromised. The DOE has also committed to make accommodations for these teachers, although details of how staff will be accommodated are not clear. Given the proper tools and training, teaching staff working remotely could be assigned to facilitate remote instruction for groups of students or help provide curricular support for families and caregivers. They also could provide remote one-on-one tutoring for students who need additional academic support.

Besides high-risk teaching staff, there are numerous school-based administrative and support staff (supervisors, clerical, and custodial workers) over the age of 55. It is not clear how or whether DOE will make accommodations for these non-instructional school-based staff, but there must be clear guidelines for ensuring the safe return for these employees. Given the cramped office spaces within most schools, many administrative staffers will need their workspaces configured to ensure proper social distancing can be accomplished. Additionally, the DOE should announce certain HR provisions such as exemptions from sick day limits as well as state and local worker safety regulations.

Recommendations for Ensuring Strong Instruction

Increase Staffing in Classrooms

While the city’s fiscal condition remains precarious, it is inescapable that if school is going to happen this fall, the DOE will need to increase staffing in all schools to maintain social distancing, provide targeted supports and help facilitate remote instruction. A model that requires class sizes to be cut from some 30 students to no more than 10 or 12 for social distancing purposes, and requires a significant percentage of students to learn remotely every day – all at a time when some 20 percent of teachers will not be able to return to school buildings safely – will not work without boosting the ranks of teachers and other learning professionals. And yet, to date, there is no evidence that the DOE is thinking creatively about how to boost in-school staffing levels. In fact, DOE is currently operating under a hiring freeze at a time when more staff – including teaching assistants, resident teachers in training, and paraprofessionals – will be necessary to support the vast array of new needs that students will have when schools reopen.

Such investments will of course cost the city money at a time of steep fiscal challenges. But it is also true that there are deeper, long-term costs associated with poor educational outcomes that will only grow over time if hard choices are not made. Likewise, without viable school options that allow parents some measure of predictability, the city’s fragile economic recovery will be slowed. Parents, especially those with elementary school-aged children, cannot reasonably return to work until children can return to school and childcare. Successfully caring for students will require significant investments, but without paying these necessary costs, the City risks system-wide failure and further, lasting damage to the economy.

In every school and across all grade levels, teachers will be working with students who have had very different experiences over the months of remote learning. To adequately address these differences, teachers will need to be able to tailor instruction in ways that offer support or enrichment according to the unique needs of each student. Depending on how physical distancing is carried out in classrooms, teachers may also need to balance supporting some of their students in remote instruction and some of their students in person. To address the challenges that lie ahead, the City must have a robust approach to classroom workforce needs that can evolve as the pandemic progresses.

Just as New York State recruited thousands of emergency medical workers to provide support in New York City’s hospitals during the peak of the coronavirus crisis in March and April, there should now be a similar recruitment effort to provide emergency support in the City’s schools. Ensuring a well-coordinated approach to building additional capacity in the school system will require swift and determined action from the Administration, but it remains feasible if the process begins immediately. Several recruitment options include:

- **Establish a large-scale hiring pipeline through a CUNY professional training program for classroom paraprofessionals.** CUNY’s community colleges are especially well-positioned to become large-scale job training providers with capacity to quickly develop and offer training for in-classroom assistant positions, based on skills and competencies identified by DOE. To support this, the City should immediately convene instructional leaders to liaise with CUNY, identify existing training programs and work to scale new programs.
- **Work with existing teacher training programs to expand in-classroom experience for teacher candidates.** Many current graduate programs already place student teachers in classrooms to gain practical experience. These programs could be adjusted to extend the length of time student teachers are working in classrooms. Teaching residency programs – where aspiring teachers are placed in classrooms for a full year prior to being certified – should be immediately expanded.
- **Leverage educational non-profit partners to provide in-classroom supports.** DOE works with numerous educational non-profits that provide afterschool and extracurricular programming. It is critical that these partnerships are preserved and that high-quality afterschool programming continues to be available for students. Where possible, some non-profit partnerships may also be able to provide in-classroom support during the school day.
- **Identify and reassign personnel working in Tweed/Central and field offices to provide in-classroom support.** Many field office and DOE Central staffers have prior classroom experience. Temporary reassignments for current DOE staff with appropriate professional experience would further expand the pool of available in-classroom personnel and ensure that every available DOE employee is directly engaged in supporting students.

Student educational needs – both academic and social-emotional – cannot be understated at this time. To prevent a learning crisis for a generation of students, the City must face its needs boldly and act with determination and conviction. A robust plan to

increase supports in classrooms is the next wave of essential work in the City, and cannot be ignored.²⁸

Build days that offer the most in-school class-time for the most students

While the shift to remote learning has clearly been a steep learning curve and a challenge for students, families, and educators alike, an even more confounding puzzle is how to structure schedules to accommodate a safe return to school buildings. The bottom line is that most New York City schools do not have the physical space necessary to accommodate all students at once, at least if restrictions around social distancing are to be maintained. In many other nations that have begun to reopen schools, school districts have adopted some type of staggered attendance schedule in order to prevent overcrowding in hallways and classrooms.²⁹ In most cases, staggering student attendance so that students attend school part of a day or a week, or alternate weeks, requires that students continue with remote instruction when they are not in class. **Unfortunately, given the varied experience – and outcomes – of remote learning in New York City, the DOE would be wiser to establish schedules that will provide the most in-person instruction to the most students.** One promising option for providing consistent access to instruction would be adopting double sessions each day, where all students attend school on the same day, but in shifts; shifts could be from 8 a.m. to 12 in the morning and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the afternoon, for example, with a one-hour intermission midday to clean classrooms and high contact surfaces.

The City has had some experience with double sessions in the past. The practice was popular in the 1950s when the combination of the Baby Boom and rapid housing expansion led to overcrowded schools. High schools in Queens, which have had persistent overcrowding, have employed some version of split schedules through the 1990s.³⁰

In considering schedules for the coming school year that maximize in-person learning for the most students, double sessions offer a clear benefit particularly for older students in grades 6-12. By attending school for at least four hours each day, students maintain a consistent framework for instruction, with regular, ongoing support from their teachers, and opportunity to socialize with peers. Students maintain access to school support staff each day, connecting with social workers or school nurses if needed. Remote learning can be more supplementary, relied on for completing assignments, rather than a platform for providing live synchronous instruction.

The advantages of such a split schedule would also apply to younger students in pre-K and elementary grades, although there would be additional challenges. To accommodate families' work schedules, adopting a split schedule for young children would need to also consider child care needs of families, including teachers. Parents and caregivers who

cannot be available to pick up or drop off their student mid-day would need supplemental care. There would be additional challenges for families with multiple younger children – either in the same or different schools. And while these hurdles are high, the benefit to having daily in-person instruction is worth pursuing, though the solutions may be unconventional.

The coming year promises to be highly time-intensive for teaching staff. To accommodate blended learning, and split schedules specifically, teachers would be required to extend their day longer than their current contract dictates. These changes obviously need to be negotiated with an eye toward providing fair compensation for additional work and childcare.

Sustain the capacity of the child care sector

There can be no broad-based return to work unless families, especially those with young children, have access to child care. Indeed, the City's success in restarting the economy depends in large part on the health of the city's child care infrastructure, already fragile prior to the pandemic due to years of national and local disinvestment. Adopting a split or staggered school schedule would require many families to identify new child care arrangements – or potentially risk the loss of work hours and income. The challenge of ensuring that there is an adequate supply of safe and affordable options for these families cannot be overstated.

While it is too early to know what the full impact of COVID-19 will be on the supply of child care in the city, the lack of significant financial assistance provided to the sector in recent months and reports from providers on the frontlines suggest that programs are facing serious threats to their fiscal viability, if not permanent closure. Unlike schools, child care programs are primarily privately-run small businesses, with providers relying on tuition fees from families and government subsidies to cover expenses. With centers in the city having been ordered closed and child care enrollment in family child care, which has continued to operate during the pandemic, diminished, many providers are experiencing steep declines in revenue at the same time that they are having to bear increased costs, including those associated with securing health and safety equipment.

According to a survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, almost a third of child care providers surveyed in New York reported that they could not survive closing more than two weeks without significant public investment to cover fixed costs, such as rent and staff.³¹ Yet, a follow-up survey revealed that only about one in four child care providers nationwide received loans through the Paycheck Protection Program.³² Meanwhile, the federal government has to date sent only \$164 million to New York through the CARES Act to help stabilize the sector. Despite the need, especially as

more New Yorkers are allowed to return to work, not all of these funds have been drawn down and made available to child care providers, and State eligibility requirements have excluded many providers in the city.

In the short-term and in the absence of additional federal stimulus dollars for care, the City must engage providers in exploring new strategies and settings to safely increase child care access, while protecting the child care workforce and connecting parents to available slots. Specifically, the City should allow child care centers that were closed in April to reopen if they can demonstrate compliance with public health guidance. Enabling these providers to open and increase enrollment should begin to bring in some of the revenue needed to keep programs afloat. At the same time, the City should ensure that public health support and technical assistance is consistently and readily available, virtually at a minimum, to all child care programs, including family child care, to troubleshoot problems and address any concerns in the coming weeks and months. A recent report by the Day Care Council of New York indicates that the emergency child care programs the City opened in the spring for the children of essential workers have benefitted from having on-site access to a trained health professional.³³

Federal CARES Act and other child care block grant funds should be used to support both center-based and family child care providers with fixed costs as well as new expenses associated with reopening and building capacity safely, respectively. In addition, to support access to care for families who are struggling financially and those who may be depending on child care during the traditional school day in new ways, the City should work with the State to develop a plan to expand income eligibility for child care assistance. The City should also consider creative strategies for safely transitioning capacity to other settings, which could entail repurposing vacant space in City-owned buildings and expediting the enrollment and training of informal care providers, who care for up to two non-relative children.

In addition, educational- and youth non-profits who have traditionally provided after school and summer programming could be an excellent resource in helping to buttress traditional childcare providers. With numerous office buildings likely to remain vacant or underutilized as companies keep portions of their staff working remotely, some office spaces could be converted to classroom space. To help accommodate family schedules, DOE should engage their educational partners in providing off-hour care, homework help, or enrichment programming in available spaces to help families manage staggered school schedules.

Invest in high quality remote learning

Nationwide, the transition to remote learning has been a steep learning curve and without doubt, many teachers, students and families have risen to the challenge. As difficult as it has been to make the transition, however, most education leaders acknowledge that to some degree, remote learning is here to stay. Both the DOE and the teachers' union have indicated support for a blended schedule when schools reopen, to support social distancing in school buildings. This will require classrooms to be divided into groups, with some students attending class in person, while other students continue with remote instruction.

In New York City, an individual student's experience with remote learning over the past three months was largely determined by choices or capacities at the school level, and recent analysis suggests significant gaps by race and income. There were few if any expectations for remote learning set by the Department of Education across the system – meaning that some classrooms offered synchronous, live instruction through Zoom or other video platform, while others relied mainly on students completing assignments independently.

Additionally, the Department of Education did not monitor daily attendance, instead tracking 'student engagement.' In some cases, students were in touch with a teacher or other adult from their school daily, while in other instances children or families didn't speak to anyone from their school community for weeks. In a recent poll of New York families, 52 percent of Black and Latinx parents responded that their child had regular live access to instruction from their teacher, compared with 57 percent of white parents. While most parents support their individual school's approach to distance learning, poll results indicate that 86 percent of parents are concerned about their child falling behind academically. Concerns about graduation readiness are especially high for Black parents; 67 percent responded they were 'very concerned', compared to 49 percent among white parents.³⁴

While the inconsistency across schools has been, perhaps, understandable given the rapid transition to remote learning, the need to standardize expectations is now clear. **To ensure that there is a baseline for instruction and outreach, the Department of Education should provide more support to educators to improve remote learning through supervision and observation, and establish clear best practices about how to make robust instruction available even when teachers and children are not together in the classroom.** Families need to know that if students are learning remotely, there will be a baseline of live, synchronous instruction and student participation as well as attendance monitoring and grading.

Schools should be given clear expectations about remote synchronous instruction and practical tools and supports that can make remote learning more engaging. For example, attention to students' social-emotional needs is always critical, and many teachers have reported that checking in with students personally was critical to transitioning into academic content in a remote environment.³⁵ Synchronous remote instruction will require considerations for teachers who need to balance their own childcare needs. Professional development for teachers can help them improve specific skills, whether technological or instructional, and discover new ways of reaching and engaging with students. **Again, additional instructional staff can support remote learning particularly in the event of future, extended school closures or a staggered attendance schedule.** Teaching assistants, newly trained through a CUNY professional learning certificate program, for example, could be deployed to provide synchronous instruction to students who are learning remotely, or provide additional in-classroom support for children who are struggling to keep pace with their peers.

The summer months offer an opportunity to provide a deep assessment of what worked well during the spring semester of remote learning, what can be scaled and expanded, and what needs improvement. Specifically, officials can and should address home connectivity gaps, and procure more hotspots and additional laptops for schools to loan to students in the coming year. Teachers who have struggled with teaching remotely should be provided with technical support, as well as professional development to learn how best to adapt lesson plans to a remote environment.

DOE should also be building quality controls to improve both remote and school-based instruction. A good place to start is by reviewing whether schools have a common platform to effectively and efficiently evaluate student progress. By providing clear information about students – using real-time data – schools can make informed decisions about the types of supports a student could most benefit from. For example, when schools reopen, every principal should be able to track engagement patterns for individual students during remote learning, whether a student received a learning device, and other information that could signal risk factors for a student, such as housing status, or history of chronic absence. This type of data – actionable and acute information – should be available to all school leaders in the coming year to help guide them in identifying and supporting students.

The DOE must assure families that all students will receive a rigorous and sufficiently challenging education, regardless of how much time is spent in an actual classroom. By setting clear expectations for synchronous instruction, robust attendance-taking practices, and clear benchmarks for measuring academic progress, the DOE can raise

the bar for implementing remote instruction well across schools – and assure families that when students are learning remotely, it is not time wasted.

Give every student a free internet-connected device

If there is one takeaway from the City’s experience with remote learning, it is that a lack of technology greatly reduces children’s ability to connect with their school community and access resources they need to progress. The DOE made extraordinary efforts to purchase and distribute internet-enabled iPads to students who lacked a device to use at home. This investment enabled hundreds of thousands of children to stay connected with their teacher and school community, and access assignments and video lessons. While online learning can never replace the value of in-person classroom experiences, there are many exceptional ways to meaningfully integrate online instruction into curricula, even when schools fully re-open.

To sustain students’ access to technology, the City should issue every student who needs one a device when they enroll in public school. Different devices could be issued at major grade transition points and the type of device should vary based on a student’s grade level. For example, a student entering kindergarten would be provided an iPad to use through elementary school, while a student entering middle or high school would be provided a Chromebook or other laptop with a keyboard. Such a policy should be implemented within a framework that values and cultivates both collaboration and independent learning, and ensures ongoing professional development to address teachers’ technological skill and ability to integrate technology into the curriculum.

In addition to device distribution, students and their families must have reliable broadband internet access, especially if remote learning continues in some degree in the years ahead. School districts in other cities have already taken steps to address the digital divide for students living in under-connected neighborhoods. Cleveland’s school district recently announced it is exploring a partnership to bring internet access to underserved neighborhoods. The school district would pay the monthly fee to connect every district family to internet service, which is expected to be more cost effective than paying for internet hotspots for students.³⁶

Engage and support parents and caregivers, in multiple languages

Parents are an indispensable partner in helping their children learn, and many parents have become more active in their children’s education during this time of school closures. In a recent national survey of parents, poll responses showed that a huge majority of parents have a heightened appreciation for their children’s teachers as a result of their involvement in remote learning.³⁷ At the same time, a large majority of parents surveyed expressed needing more supports to understand what students are

learning and how to guide their progress. Some parents have struggled to access the broader learning goals of their student's curriculum, either because of language barriers, or simply because they are unfamiliar with the content or technology being used.

To better support parents and families, the DOE should formalize a process for parent feedback at the school and district levels with more opportunities for parents to learn about expectations for remote learning and understand the curriculum and available resources. This could take the form of weekly online office hours with a principal or teachers, or a regular community forum for all parents. Communication with parents must be accessible in multiple languages. The DOE must also ensure technical supports, including the computer help desk, continue to be available to students and families, and that basic school supplies such as notebooks, pencils, crayons, and markers, are available as well.

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