

Questions Before Opening Schools

Real issues, realistic solutions

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With so many things happening in our world and in our country, now is the time to talk about some of the transformational changes that need to occur within our schools. Each facet of society will need to make changes to insure everyone's health and well-being. Schools are not excluded. We need to start asking some tough questions and seeking realistic solutions.

For years middle level education leaders, parents, and teachers have been saying, "*We need to _____.*"

Our usual "normal" has been shattered. So, let's see this as an extraordinary moment to transform the norm by doing some of those things we've been saying need to happen.

School, in some form, will start in a matter of weeks. States and districts are planning what our schools will look like when we return. Beyond the plans at those levels, the question remains for teachers and leaders at individual schools: "What answers do *we* need in order to open school, and where do we start?"

Here are some critical areas to address and re-envision before students enter school doors, hallways, classrooms, gyms, and cafeterias. We've posed questions, considerations, and ideas for you to consider as you plan. It is our hope that some of the insights will start your discussions around these opportunities (and imperatives) for change.

- Survey, gather, and share information from students, parents, and staff. Create agreed-upon protocols.
- Plan to meet the social-emotional needs of students, parents and teachers.

- Re-evaluate the curriculum, instruction, and connections among disciplines.
- Redefine the roles of the educator.
- Build stronger bridges with parents and families

Gathering and Sharing Information

Take this incredible chance to gather information from all stakeholders in your school community. The first step is to create a leadership team of administrators, teachers, parents, and students to help formulate key questions that must be asked and answered before students return. The time you take to survey parents, students, and teachers (and other school staff) will be critical to creating a plan to reintroduce everyone to school.

Be sure to ask these questions of all stakeholders:

1. What have you learned about yourself during this quarantine experience?
2. What is your biggest fear about returning to school?
3. What would make you feel more comfortable to enter the school building?
4. What ideas or suggestions would you offer regarding returning to school?
5. What should we (the school and its staff) not do?
6. How comfortable are you with alternative schedules (half days or every-other-day attendance for groups of students)?
7. How useful was virtual learning during the quarantine/summer?
8. What suggestions do you have to make future virtual or distance learning better?

The next step is this: With the leadership team, review, organize, and summarize the responses. Get a good sense of the pulse of your school community. Define the trends in thoughts, fears, concerns, and ideas. Take all of them seriously. Identify those you can control. Seek out and plan honest, thoughtful, workable solutions to address the concerns and embrace the suggestions.

Creating Protocols

Departments of education and local school districts are working hard to develop new protocols for schools. Much of this is not within our control (that is, teachers and leaders of individual schools). What we can control are some of the ways we reintroduce students to school. Here is what we can do once the state and district guidelines are introduced:

1. Have a teacher record a welcome video of his or her classroom. This will allow students and parents to see the room before they arrive
2. Create a virtual tour of the building.
3. Create some humorous videos on how to open a locker.
4. Meet with students virtually before school starts to talk about what the new norms will be and explain why we need to be respectful of our students' space. Be sure to reach each student. Share classroom and team norms before students arrive back to school. Let them know all measures that will be in place to look out for their health, what will be different, how materials (including personal possessions and backpacks) will be handled, etc.
5. Put the protocols in writing. Send them to each family. Also share them virtually if possible.

6. Make sure families have straightforward information about how learning will happen if they choose to continue it from home.
7. Offer families an “information channel” to ask burning questions they have before returning. This will help calm fears and build trust in the school staff.

There must be an emphasis on the non-negotiable items within the school. If masks are required, how will it be handled if a student or staff member refuses? If many of these precautions are designed for the safety of others, what will be the protocol for not complying? Make sure such decisions are made and communicated to students and families.

Meeting the SEL Needs of Students, Parents, and Teachers

It’s normal to have feelings of apprehension and reticence when it comes to the start of any school year. Now with the added health concerns, teachers, parents, and students are going to be extra nervous. Many will feel torn between returning to school and being safe at home. Outside influences such as the media, social media, friends, and even parents can feed students’ anxieties.

Schools need to acknowledge and listen to these fears. They must continue to check in on the social and emotional well-being of the school community as a whole. This includes teachers! Now is the time to create an extended SEL plan. Here are some questions to ask of yourselves:

1. How will students react to being in a crowded classroom?
2. How do teachers feel about being in a classroom with over 25 students?
3. What should teachers and students with compromised immune systems do about returning to school?
4. Are the current policies on absence appropriate?
5. How will counseling staff implement long-term care, not just for students, but also for parents and staff?
6. Is there an appropriate advisory system in place?
7. Has an SEL team been formed to set plans for helping students adjust back to the school setting (and to the changed school setting)?
8. What practices will we follow to respond to the trauma students have incurred?
9. How will we prioritize and nurture relationships that buffer the anxiety?
10. What approaches will we practice to help manage emotions?
11. How will we set the tone for the calm, predictable, and stable climate that students need? (Remember: kids can’t learn if they feel unsafe, scattered, or anxious.)
12. What measures will be provided for students (or parents) to voice their fears, get help, ask questions, or receive comfort during the school day?
13. How will we provide for the actions that protect students from distress such as laughter, fun, exercise, relaxation, fresh air, access to support from staff members?
14. How will we adults in the school attend to our individual needs for calm, trust, hope, and energy in the face of the tasks of teaching well while keeping safe?

Curriculum and Connections

Already, during the shut-down, many schools have reframed choices about curriculum as well as about learning practices and tools. As a new school year fraught with uncertainty looms, all educators are pressed to get ready

to step into unfamiliar territory. We're pressed to make decisions about priorities and how to manage them. With understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all program, we share some thoughts and strategies to consider as you continue to transform the norm in matters of curriculum.

1. In grade-level groups or teams, take time to review what curriculum is critical and must be taught versus the need to teach everything. Make decisions about this and set priorities for coverage.
2. In grade-level groups or teams, decide what to do about lost learning of the 2019-2020 year. What concepts and skills are critical to review or teach because they didn't get them in the first place? How will you make sure all students are ready to move on to new content and next-level skills?
3. Start looking at the curriculum for the first semester of school. Now is the time to start building innovative lessons for next year. We know there will be at least some virtual teaching needs for kids (who don't return to school or leave for extended periods of time). Why not be proactive and start recording lessons now?
4. Most schools will likely need some kind of hybrid learning model to accommodate students who are not comfortable returning to the in-school setting. Thus, in all curriculum planning, think about how assignments will be provided both in and out of the classroom, both in print or hands-on work and technologically.
5. Coordinate among disciplines to teach similar concepts or skills at the same time.
6. Create lessons with other department-level teachers so you can build a great archive of lessons for students. For example: One teacher can take these seven parts of the curriculum and a colleague can take the other seven. Then together they can create pre-recorded lessons to use.
7. Meet with other teachers to talk about ways to have assignments that can be counted for multiple subjects.
8. Make sure video lessons are short and sweet and directly cover key points.
9. Use resources outside the classroom to demonstrate a lesson. Involve your own family in the lesson. Make sure the task at the end has a hands-on experience or includes a practical problem that the students must solve.
10. Start creating learning logs into which students enter curriculum connections that they see in real life.
11. Advocate for a plan (and the funds) to see that every student has a digital tablet or computer to use at home. Push for free Internet services for all students.
12. Coordinate assignments across classes and disciplines. Have a standard system for communicating and keeping track of assignments for all students. Make sure students aren't deluged with emails and directives from several different teachers every day. Don't assume that each student will automatically manage to keep track of multiple assignments well. Doing the assignment is the important thing; let's not overwhelm students with just figuring out what the assignments are and which to do when.

Reimagining the Role of the Educator

How we deliver instruction, monitor progress, and assess learning needs to change. Period. No longer is the teacher the smartest person in the room. Students understand the vast resources that are available to them. We are no longer confined to the walls of a classroom. There is no need for sit-and-get teaching as a default model. The time is now for our districts to be bold—to stand up against standardized tests as the mark of what a student knows, to remove our teachers as supreme knowledge givers, and instead help them become facilitators who learn beside their students. It's time to implement multiple teaching strategies beyond what we've always used. We can set up in-class learning centers or online learning packets, virtual lessons, social media resources, project-based opportunities, virtual small groupings, and a host of other tech or non-tech approaches. More than ever, our students are looking at us and asking, "Why are you telling me this? I can Google it."

Here are some ideas that can help change the role of the teacher:

1. Be prepared to offer live and virtual lessons.
2. Use other teachers in the building to help deliver virtual lessons.
3. Make sure you have some creative learning centers to help divide students into smaller groups.
4. Hire staff to deliver virtual lessons (or engage the teachers who choose not to return to the school building right now).
5. Use students to create and deliver lessons and to check up on concepts learned.
6. Review grading practices and opportunities for multiple assignments in multiple grades and subjects.
7. Consider doing live classes in the morning and virtual classes in the afternoon.
8. Set intentional plans (with specific practices) to listen to the students' voices and to allow student choice. This goes far beyond just engaging students in activities. It means that we must empower today's students to become problem solvers, creators, innovators. These are the skills that our economy requires and that students must have for the school world and the real world.

Building Stronger Bridges with Parents

The old saying goes, "Everyone is an expert in school because we all went through it." During this quarantine time, many parents have gotten a taste of what it's like to be teachers. They've also been able to experience and understand some of their own children's academic and behavioral strengths and issues. They've dealt with their child's lack of motivation and defiance around wanting to do schoolwork. Parents have had to set up expectations and hold their own children accountable to their school lessons. At the same time, teachers themselves have become all-day parents to their own children.

This quarantine has brought parents and teachers to a place where they are sharing roles—teachers and parents both! This is a great opportunity for everyone to notice some camaraderie and get on the same page for the task of helping their children and students learn. How can we create strong bridges that allow teachers and parents to work together with genuine cooperation for one purpose? Here are a few ideas:

1. Send thank you videos to parents to help close out the current school year (even if the year is officially over).
2. When school opens again, thank the parents with a celebration.
3. Get creative with ideas for offering professional development for parents. Use a variety of approaches—virtual "helps," emails, articles, guides.
4. Ask parents if offering remote learning for most of the week is better suited for their child in the fall. (Many kids that struggled in the traditional environment are thriving at home.)
5. Create Google or Zoom Meets for parents to check in but establish agendas rather than having an open-ended meeting. Agenda ideas could include such things as: how to motivate their child, accessing grading programs, or how to take care of themselves.
6. For parents of students in grades P-8, allow parents to determine if their child will receive a letter grade or Pass/Fail grade during remote learning. Make sure to set and communicate clear criteria for either grading approach. Have parents help in the grading.
7. Invite parents (that represent your demographics) to serve on a transition team for heading back in the fall.
8. Make sure parents have an easy, reliable way to get in touch with the teacher or other school official—when they need help, have questions, or need any kind of support for themselves or their child.

Remember; there are some things we can control during this time and other things that will be mandated. Right now, let's spend some time dealing with what we can change immediately in our school.

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