

10 big questions educators are asking about reopening N.J. schools

By [Adam Clark | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

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Classrooms like this one in Highland Park will look different when schools reopen this fall. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media
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Schools. Must. Open.

That message came loud and clear from Gov. Phil Murphy last week as the state released [long-awaited guidance](#) for reopening more than 2,500 public schools.

But what, exactly, will socially distant school look like this fall?

How many new rules are coming?

And how long can we expect schools to stay open before the coronavirus strikes again?

The answers are going to vary among the state's 500-plus districts, which were [essentially given minimum requirements](#) and afforded maximum flexibility to hit the ground running.

Schools must develop their restart plans over the coming weeks. Here are 10 key questions they are trying to answer.

Is it possible to bring back every student, every day?

The state's guidance is all about options. How many students can return to school buildings is one of them.

Districts are allowed to reopen at normal capacity. But unless those schools have an abundance of extra space, it will mean mandatory face coverings and sacrificing social distancing.

School leaders have been drawing up plans to determine the maximum number of students they can fit while maintaining social distancing. And it's just not going to work for many of them.

"I really think that people want to get all the kids in," said Tony Trongone, superintendent of Pemberton Township Schools. "With social distancing, with six feet, you can't do that."

The state guidance allows schools to abandon social distancing requirements, so long as students wear face coverings.

But some districts are already erring on the side of caution. They're preparing for split schedules instead of attempting to bring all students back sitting closely together.

How many families won't send their kids back to school?

Plenty of parents are desperate for their children to go back to school. And the American Academy of Pediatrics has stressed a long list of benefits for kids who are going back into the classroom.

But some students have medical reasons for staying home, and schools know other families won't be ready to return until there's a COVID-19 vaccine.

"I know families that are still really in the house," said Cathy Lindenbaum, president of the New Jersey PTA. "We can't say to those families, 'You're wrong.' How can we do that? We don't really know enough about this disease."

The state guidance does not detail whether parents can opt their children out of going to school in person if they are not comfortable with the risk of COVID-19 infection. But state Education Commissioner Lamont Repollet said school districts will have flexibility to meet the needs of their students.

"We hope that district leaders do not penalize students and parents who opt to use a remote level," Repollet said.

Schools must figure out the best way to incorporate those students into their plans.

Should virtual-only students be in the same class as students who attend both virtual and in-person classes? Or should schools create a virtual section of third grade taught by one teacher?

Much will depend on exactly how many students stay home.

What's a good reason for employees to work remotely?

The state's largest teachers union has been adamant that staff members who are at high risk should be allowed to work from home.

But what about a teacher or staff member who lives with a senior citizen or a high-risk spouse? And how many healthy employees will ask to stay home out of an abundance of caution?

"We have a lot of members who are not comfortable, even with the guidelines, short of a vaccine," said Anthony Rosamilia, president of the Essex County Education Association.

Districts will have to make decisions about who gets to work from home, and it's going to be difficult to please everyone, said David Rubin, a longtime school board attorney. The question is one of "a Disney World of legal issues" schools must consider, he said.

"The manual encourages districts to be accommodating to people, perhaps even beyond what their legal rights may be," Rubin said. "How do you draw that line without others feeling like they are carrying the weight of other people?"

One district, Mount Olive Township, has already said it plans to handle those requests on a case-by-case basis.

Yet no district can have a final plan for reopening until it knows just how many teachers are working from home, Trongone said.

"Hopefully, the teachers who are medically compromised are congruent to students who are medically comprised, so they can teach those kids,"

Trongone said. "It's just a Jenga puzzle."

Should districts require all students to wear face coverings?

Highland Park Public Schools officials were so convinced the state would require face coverings that they already bought three reusable masks for every student, Superintendent Scott Taylor said.

Then came the surprise: Face coverings are "strongly encouraged," but not mandatory as long as social distancing is observed, according to state guidance.

Now, Taylor worries schools could be pulled into the national health and political debate over masks.

"You know how it is with all these communities making different decisions," he said. "There is going to be pressure to do what the neighboring community is going to do when it comes to kids wearing masks."

Teachers are required to wear face coverings, and Taylor thinks they would be safest if students wear them too, he said. But the district has not yet made a final decision.

How will new rules be enforced?

One-way hallways. Masks on teachers. Social distancing on buses.

New rules in schools will be ample and wide-ranging, which begs a critical question.

"How is that enforceable?" asked Patricia Wright, executive director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. "What does that look like? What policies need to be developed?"

But beyond stopping first graders from touching each other, larger enforcement questions linger.

Who's watching school districts to ensure they follow the guidelines? And how much power does the state really have to force districts to comply?

"It is a manual," Rubin said of the 104-page guidance document. "Just what the legal standing of it is, is a question in and of itself."

Can schools pay for all of this?

From masks for teachers to extra hand soap to plexiglass dividers, schools are staring at a [mounting pile of bills](#) just to get their doors open.

The average American school district, with about 3,600 students, will need to spend an extra \$1.7 million next school year because of COVID-19 precautions, according to a projection by the national School Superintendents Association.

"The words 'unfunded mandate' come to mind when you look at a lot of the things that are being required," Rubin said.

The state is giving schools flexibility in using reserve funds and federal CARES Act money, which should help districts with unanticipated expenditures.

But that hasn't eliminated significant concerns among some school leaders, especially since there's no telling when schools can actually return to normal.

"The CARES Act money seems to be the panacea," Trongone said. "'The CARES Act money will take care of this. The CARES Act money will take care of that.' That might be the solution for one year. What happens the year after that?"

Can schools really do contract tracing?

State guidance says schools must work their local health department and school nurses to use contact tracing to identify anyone who has come in contact with people with COVID-19.

But several superintendents have said that's entirely out of their wheelhouse.

"It makes me a bit uneasy that contact tracing is pushed on local districts rather than the state," said Robert Beers, superintendent of Manville Public Schools. "I think there has to be some type of protocol and structure on that whether it comes from county, state, federal, and what our best practices should be."

And some schools have already heard complaints about potential invasions of privacy if the school is tracking the activities of students and staff.

"You know, they want to look at who they're interacting with, how long you're interacting with them," said Thomas Smith, superintendent of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District. "Who does that fall on?"

Who will do the tracing will likely vary from district to district.

In Mount Olive, the district is recruiting some staff members to take a three-hour online certification course through Johns Hopkins University, Zywicki said.

What will it take for schools to shut down again?

Even before Gov. Phil Murphy ordered all schools to shut down in March, many districts were already temporarily closed because of COVID-19 exposure among students and staff.

With the virus still circulating (and cases escalating in other states), it could

be only a matter of time before districts are forced to grapple with coronavirus cases again.

So what causes a closure? And for how long?

"I've got to be honest with you," Taylor said. "We haven't crossed that bridge yet."

Highland Park plans to speak with an infectious disease expert to coordinate plans for various of levels of student or staff exposure to the virus, he said.

Will students feel safe?

Sure, schools can reopen. But teachers are worried the friendly learning environments students left in March will not return until there's a cure.

"Will students, especially young students, will they feel safe?" Rosamilia said. "I think that's a very big question. I know that's what my members are asking. It is going to be very difficult under those conditions for learning."

Beyond implementing safety measures, schools will need to undertake a massive effort to assess the mental health of students.

Highland Park is already beginning that project with a special program for small groups of students this summer, Taylor said.

What if COVID-19 stops schools from reopening entirely?

Whether the state can reopen shops and restaurants and contain the virus remains to be seen. The governor already has delayed the [reopening of restaurants for indoor dining](#).

So schools are also preparing for the possibility that their doors remain closed if the health landscape changes.

They have to improve remote education, Lindenbaum said, because parents will expect more than when virtual learning ended in June.

“Hopefully there won’t be a next time,” she said. “But if we do have to shut down again, I think we will know more about the kinks here and better be able to fix that.”

NJ Advance Media staff writer [Sophie Nieto-Munoz](#) contributed to this report.

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Will the kids be able to learn?