



# YARMOUTH SCHOOL DEPARTMENT

*"Empowering Students"*

## **Planning for the Reopening of Schools**

During her press conference on April 28, 2020, Gov. Janet Mills extended, and amended, Maine's Stay-at-Home Order through May 31, 2020. In her presentation the governor provided details of the phase-in model by which we hope to re-open our state's economy. This is a 4-stage plan in which the reopening of schools would occur in the final stage, no sooner than September, 2020 and possibly later, depending on the success of the first three stages. The plan provides limits on sizes of group gatherings while identifying certain criteria that would indicate readiness for some businesses to begin to open their doors as public health and safety permits. Certain summer and tourist industries were included as examples, which may prompt questions and/or pressure from constituents regarding summer school programs, athletics, end-of-year celebrations, and use of school facilities for various summer programs. In her April 28 memo to School Superintendents, Maine's Commissioner of Education, Pender Makin, made it clear that, "the Governor's announcement applies to businesses, and not to school programs; it is important to note that the State's recommendation, provided April 7, to continue remote learning plans for the remainder of the school year still stands. Businesses will have the option of opening, and customers will have the option of entering/participating, but school is a compulsory activity with extremely complex considerations, and therefore decisions around opening schools to in-person activities merit a higher standard of safety assurances."

### **Assumptions (adapted from San Diego County Public Schools)**

Based on available information as of April 28, 2020, it is reasonable and prudent for the Yarmouth Schools to create contingency plans based on the following assumptions.

- The virus that causes COVID-19 will remain in circulation until a vaccine is developed and widely used.
  - a. A vaccine is not likely to be in broad use during the next 18 months.
  - b. During this time, improvements in understanding of the virus and in testing will allow public health officials to act with greater precision when taking steps to slow the rate of infection. Broad stay-at-home orders and long-term school closures may not be needed in the future.
  - c. A second wave of infections is expected, possibly coinciding with flu season in October or November. This wave may not be as significant as the first but could result in regional or local school closures of varying amounts of time.
  - d. Short-term closures of single or multiple schools will remain a possibility until a vaccine is widely used.
  - e. Children and staff with significant health conditions will continue to be especially vulnerable during this time.
  - f. Teaching and reinforcing prevention behaviors (handwashing and cough/sneeze etiquette) and promoting flu vaccinations will continue to be important strategies in slowing the spread of this and other infectious diseases.
  - g. Frequent cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces will also be needed throughout this period.

- It will be safe for schools to return to normal operations when Governor Mills and Maine CDC indicate that Maine has entered Phase 4 of the statewide reopening plan.
- It is unlikely that traditional graduation ceremonies and promotion assemblies will be allowed this summer. Even if permissible, convening large groups during this time frame may still be inadvisable.
- When schools are permitted to re-open, it is likely that operations will need to be modified to include:
  - a. Proactive screening of students and staff for symptoms
  - b. Social distancing in all settings
  - c. Limits on group size
- Fear, loss, and isolation will result in the need for increased mental health supports.
  - a. The strain of a 12 to 18-month duration will overwhelm the coping skills of many.
  - b. Coping for people with pre-existing mental health concerns will be very difficult.
  - c. Suicide attempts and completions may rise.
  - d. Substance abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence are also likely to rise.
- The economic impacts of the pandemic will have significant and lasting impacts on schools.
  - a. State tax revenues may fall well below those of previous years with reductions in school funding likely.
  - b. School nutrition programs will be needed by more students and will become a more significant portion of their access to food. Accommodations to provide continued access to meals for children who are ill or required to self-isolate may be necessary until COVID-19 is controlled.
  - c. The number of children and families experiencing homelessness and eligible for the support and protections required under the McKinney-Vento Act is likely to increase.
- Student and employee attendance rates may decline in 2020-21.
  - a. Students and staff with COVID-19, and those who are directly exposed, may miss two or more weeks of school. In larger households, children may be required to miss school for an extended period if the disease affects other members of their family.
  - b. School staff will become more concerned about COVID-19 symptoms and encourage students and staff with symptoms to stay home.
  - c. Fear and rumors will also negatively impact student and employee attendance rates.
  - d. Temporary employees/substitutes may be in more demand as employee absences rise.
- Student learning outcomes going into the 2020-21 year will be uneven and vary broadly.
  - a. Almost all students will begin the next year with learning deficits.
  - b. The most able and advantaged are likely to be better off.

- c. The most disadvantaged are likely to suffer learning regression.
- Increases in special education due process filings and demands for compensatory education are likely to increase unless relief from some of the provisions in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is authorized.
- There will continue to be a broad spectrum of opinions in the community regarding government and school responses (from overreacting to under reacting) to COVID-19. Impacts could include:
  - a. Non-compliance with measures enacted by the school
  - b. Increased contact with school leaders, district administration and School Committee members
  - c. Demonstrations
- Structural changes (staggered schedules and/or blended learning configurations) needed to implement social distancing, and periodic school closures, will increase childcare needs for many families and create new challenges for before- and after-school programs.
- The challenges posed by COVID-19, and the duration of this threat, will make it more difficult for school districts to make unified decisions. Differences in resources, negotiations, community concerns, and direction from public health services in response to local conditions will impact local decision-making.

## General Recommendations

### 1. Carefully consider when to reopen schools.

Districts should weigh the potential risks and benefits of reopening during the current school year.

- Many parents will resist the idea that it is safe to return their children to school so soon after the apex of this crisis. Many others will be angry that they are being required to make this choice. Many staff members will share these concerns.
- What are the district's goals for the remainder of the school year? Are the intended outcomes substantial enough to warrant reopening for a short period of time?
- Are we prepared to open with coronavirus in circulation?
  - What special accommodations do we need to protect vulnerable students and employees?
  - Do we have the supplies we need to maintain heightened prevention measures (hand sanitizer, cleaning, disinfection products, and personal protective equipment)?
  - Do we have a plan to prevent symptomatic and asymptomatic spread?
    - Are we prepared to implement social distancing in all settings?
    - Do we have a plan to ensure all students and staff wear face coverings?
    - Are we prepared to screen children and adults entering campuses for symptoms?
- Do we have the physical capacity to reopen schools in the time remaining?

- What are the impacts the prolonged closure has had on our readiness to return?
- What supplies and equipment must be returned or replaced?
- What activities must occur first?
- What staffing issues have occurred while we've been out?
- What staffing changes will be required to support the operational changes required by COVID-19?
- Have we prepared our employees to return? Have we identified all their concerns and are we prepared with responses?
- Could the time be put to better use? The 2020-21 school year will pose unique challenges. COVID-19 will remain an active threat. Would using this time to work with our staffs to develop plans to meet those challenges be of greater benefit?

**2. Create contingency plans for graduation and promotion ceremonies.**

While there is a small chance that holding physical graduation ceremonies may be permissible this summer, it is likely that incorporating measures to limit asymptomatic spread (social distancing and the use of masks) will be required. Schools holding physical ceremonies with these controls in place during the ceremony will also be hard pressed to maintain them immediately before and after the event.

Holding physical ceremonies will be perceived as a risk by many in the school community. Many parents will refuse to allow their children to participate and many more will be angered by the fact that they are being required to make that choice.

- Create contingency plans to hold virtual ceremonies.
- When planning physical ceremonies are used:
  - Hold off on scheduling until there is greater clarity on when and if these events will be allowable
  - Webcast the events to allow family members who cannot or should not attend to view the event
  - Develop plans to protect medically fragile students who are graduating
  - Incorporate plans for student management before, during, and immediately after the event

**3. Adapt all processes and timelines necessary to prepare for the new school year.**

- Use job-alike groups to examine all routines used to prepare for the next school year and develop alternative means for accomplishing the needed outcomes.
- Include adaptations that incorporate social distancing and online alternatives.
- Include special accommodations for people who are at higher risk, those who may be sick or who must self-isolate, and those who lack internet access.

**4. Prepare for the possibility that the start of the 2020-21 school year may need to be delayed.** Calendars with start dates earlier in the summer are more likely to be impacted than those that start in September.

**5. Create plans to restore operations in phases.**

Reopening schools will require careful identification of the activities needed for return

and the order in which they should be implemented. Create timelines and communication plans to support each phase.

**6. Consider the precautions necessary to protect students with special needs relative to the threat posed by COVID-19.**

- What does a free and appropriate education look like for students who are immunosuppressed or who have significant health challenges?
- What special procedures will be necessary to protect students in classrooms that serve severely handicapped students?
- What is our plan for determining appropriate placements, services, and accommodations for:
  - Students supported by Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
  - Students supported by 504 plans
  - Students supported by medical plans

**7. Create plans to assess and respond to the uneven outcomes created by school closures.**

- What formative assessment tools can we use to understand the individual and collective needs of our students?
- What is our plan to accelerate learning and close gaps?
- What process will we use to access and remedy impacts to students with specific learning needs:
  - Students supported by IEPs
  - Students supported by 504 plans
  - English language learners

**8. Develop a continuum of distance learning options.**

- Develop robust independent study programs as an alternative for parents who want this option. Include a variety of options that allow students in independent study programs to participate in campus life (electives, sports, dances, etc.).
- Consider the use of learning centers to support student learning with weekly in-person and virtual appointments for support.
- Develop the capacity to provide synchronous interactive distance learning (via classroom webcast) as a means of providing instruction for students who cannot physically participate in classroom instruction.
- Develop the capacity to provide home and hospital instruction (Education Code Section 48206.3) via the internet (Zoom or other means) to assist students who are ill, under quarantine, or in self-isolation.
- During closures, use a virtual learning center approach to provide individual and small-group instruction to all students at least once per week by appointment.
  - Provide in-person appointments using social distancing and prevention measures as an option if connectivity is not available.

**9. Develop a continuum of strategies for implementation if social distancing is required.**

Identify all locations and times where students are in close contact with each other and create strategies to restructure those locations and activities.

- Consider altering bell schedules, staggering start times, creating multiple recess and lunch periods, and creating multiple meal distribution points.
- In secondary schools, consider implementing a block schedule to reduce student movement during the day and cross contamination of classrooms.
- Consider the impact of social distancing on school provided transportation.
- Create plans that respond to the impact of these strategies on the need for childcare, and before- and after-school programs.

**10. Create plans to limit symptomatic and asymptomatic spread.**

- Screen all students, employees, and visitors for symptoms including fever
- Require all students and staff to wear face coverings
- Determine what supplies will be required (face covering, thermometers, personal protective equipment, etc.)
- Create staffing plans, modify job descriptions, negotiate needed changes

**11. Develop plans to blend classroom and distance learning as an alternative to school closures.**

Option 1: Limit the number of students on campus to 50% of normal.

- Divide all classes into two equal groups: one would come to school on Monday and Wednesday, the other on Tuesday and Thursday.
- All teachers provide each group with two days of direct instruction and support, and three days of assignments to complete at home each week.
  - Secondary schools could also implement a block schedule to reduce passing periods and lower the frequency of touches in each classroom.
  - Provide take-home meals for each eligible student before they leave each day.

Option 2: Limit the number of students on campus to 20% of normal.

- All classes are divided into five equal groups: one for each day of the week.
- All teachers provide each group with one day of direct instruction and support, and four days of assignments to complete at home.
- Provide take-home meals for each eligible student before they leave each day.
- Use Friday for teachers to provide individual or small-group support by appointment or to prepare packets for the next week.

Option 3: For districts and charter schools that can provide universal internet access, pair Option 1 or 2 with a classroom webcast to provide direct instruction five days a week.

**12. Consider making work assignments and/or accommodations to protect employees in high-risk groups.**

- When possible and appropriate, assign teachers in high-risk groups to independent study programs.
- When possible and appropriate, assign classified employees in high-risk groups to

- roles and environments where social distancing can be maintained.
- Consider the installation of physical barriers in reception areas and workspaces where the environment cannot accommodate social distancing.

**13. Develop and implement strategies to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.**

- Teach handwashing and cough and sneeze etiquette at all grade levels and reinforce on an ongoing basis.
- Schedule time and structure routines for handwashing at the start of each class period.
- Schedule frequent disinfection of high-touch surfaces.

**14. Develop plans to support the mental health of students and families.**

- Implement social-emotional learning lessons to develop strong coping skills.
- Adapt Multi-Tiered System of Support to work when schools are working under the modifications described above.
- Implement strategies to ensure all students are highly connected to the school. Make sure all students have positive, meaningful, and dependable contact with at least one employee each week.
- Implement systems to identify students who are struggling and to provide appropriate support.
- Ensure mental health supports are appropriate for students who have known challenges.
- Incorporate regular check-ins with parents and offer supports and resources appropriate to their needs.

**15. Develop plans to provide access to school meal programs for qualifying students who are impacted by COVID-19.**

- Develop procedures that allow that allow a parent or an adult designated by the parent to pick- up meals for children who are absent due to illness or who are required to self-isolate.
  - If classroom and distance learning will be blended, include procedures to allow qualifying students to take home meals for the days they will not be on campus.
  - Develop procedures to provide access to meals for qualifying students enrolled in fulltime independent study programs.
- NOTE: Advocacy with state and federal legislators may be required to support these recommendations.

**16. Develop procedures to identify and assist students who are experiencing homelessness.**

- Develop strategies to mitigate the impact that site/office closures, limitations on walk-ins, and limited office hours, has on a school's ability to identify children who are eligible for McKinney- Vento support and protections.
- Develop procedures for regular contact with parents experiencing homelessness to prepare them for each shift in school operations.

**17. Advocate with state legislators to provide funding to make summer acceleration programs available to all students.**

**18. Collaborate with employee associations when developing plans that impact the work of their members.**

### **Considerations:**

Adapted from: What it might look like to safely reopen schools, by Anya Kamenetz (2020 npr.org)

- 1) Stepped-up health and hygiene measures
- 2) Smaller class sizes – based on square footage
- 3) Staggered schedules (alternating days/sessions)
- 4) Younger kids first?
- 5) New calendars (Starting later, ending later)
- 6) Adjusted attendance policies (More allowances for remote learning)
- 7) No assemblies, athletic events, co-curricular activities or parent-teacher conferences
- 8) Remote learning continues, periodically or consistently in a varied schedule
- 9) Social, emotional and practical help for kids