

# The Uncertain Road Ahead

## Reopening schools in the time of COVID-19

### Executive summary

In *The Uncertain Road Ahead: Reopening Schools in the Time of COVID-19*, CSBA seeks to answer some important questions on the subject of reopening schools. While there are no clear solutions in this unprecedented situation, this report presents a robust examination of what it will take to reopen schools safely and effectively. While many education organizations and county offices of education have recently released guidance, this report provides a framework in which district and county office boards can make decisions based on their local circumstances, focused on the areas of health and safety, high-quality teaching and learning, equity, funding and flexibility. *The Uncertain Road Ahead* also provides important questions for board members to ask and answer while planning for the 2020–21 school year, and an overview of CSBA's efforts to advocate for the resources, guidance, funding and support schools need to navigate this crisis and reopen schools safely.

#### Health and safety

The health and safety of students and staff is paramount when making decisions about resuming in-person instruction in the 2020–21 academic year. [Recent guidance](#) by the California Department of Public Health outlines the conditions that should be met prior to reopening, including physical distancing, healthy hygiene practices, sanitation measures, screening staff and students for symptoms upon campus entry and the need for contingency plans should a staff or student become ill with COVID-19.

CSBA supports these health and safety guidelines, but the reality on the ground is that schools must have the resources to implement them without diverting resources away from instruction. CSBA is engaged in advocacy at the state and federal levels to address these funding issues. Local

educational agencies should be working with their local public health officials to develop protocols for deciding when it is safe to reopen campuses, as well as when future classroom, school site or LEA closures are warranted.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and CDPH advise that physical distancing is the primary strategy to reduce transmission of the coronavirus. LEAs should consider scheduling alternatives that limit the number of students and staff on campus at any given time. Decision-making should factor in the impact of health and safety risks, cost, implications for child care for families and employees, stakeholder input and the impact on instructional quality.

#### Funding and resources

Given the necessary health and safety measures for reopening, additional significant investment is needed at both the state and federal level. CSBA is advocating for the funding LEAs need to safely reopen schools while addressing the needs of all students and staff.

**Health and safety:** State and federal funding must be able to cover the totality of the health and safety concerns to address the needs of students, employees and their families.

**Technology:** Funding at the state and federal levels should provide broadband access to all communities to accommodate appropriate distance learning opportunities for all students. CSBA is advocating for a tech bond to address these issues.

**Special education:** LEAs need increased state and federal funding, along with regulatory flexibility, to appropriately address the needs of special education students.

**Supporting student groups:** Connect funding needs to issues and considerations of the various LCFF student groups, including access to services and programs necessary to close achievement gaps.



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## Adaptable, high-quality teaching and learning

The instruction students received this spring was not representative of what distance learning could be under normal conditions. This summer, LEAs should draw on the many resources available to them as they plan for a multitude of scenarios (many of which are provided in Appendix B of the report and are available at [www.csba.org/coronavirus](http://www.csba.org/coronavirus)). Priorities for providing adaptable, high-quality teaching and learning include investing in professional learning opportunities to deepen staff understanding of blended learning approaches and distance learning, stakeholder engagement, addressing uneven educational quality due to COVID-related disruptions, and planning for the rapid transition back to full-time distance learning if local public health conditions require schools to close again.

Surveying families and staff to identify their needs and preferences for the upcoming school year can give LEAs a sense of how many families may need options for distance learning and which teachers may not be willing to return to campuses, either due to pre-existing health conditions or to concerns about the risk of infection prior to the release of a vaccine. Surveys can also help determine how engaged students were with distance learning during school closures. Schools should have a plan to identify potential gaps in content knowledge so educators can provide the instruction needed. One option is the use of diagnostic assessments, which are designed to assess student understanding of standards-based content so that educators can pinpoint strategies to the needs of their students.

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## Equitable supports for all students

Recent campus closures highlighted how integral schools are in supporting the health, learning and well-being of California's students. LEAs must plan to ensure all students have access to the supports they need, no matter which instructional model is used in the 2020–21 school year. Chief among these concerns is making sure every student has a mobile device and broadband internet access — for many of California's districts, the digital divide has been the greatest barrier

to ensuring all students have access to instruction during distance learning. Special considerations should be given to already-vulnerable student groups such as students with disabilities, students in low-income households, English learners, and homeless and foster youth.

Additional consideration should be given to providing mental health supports for student and staff, whose needs may have increased due to challenges associated with anxiety about the pandemic, extended social isolation and other stressors that students and staff might be experiencing during school closures.

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## Flexibility

Unprecedented times require innovative responses. When schools suddenly closed this March, the state and federal government provided flexibility in many areas through executive orders, waivers and other measures. However, many of these measures are scheduled to expire on July 1, 2020. The proposed scenarios for resuming school will require regulatory relief. A CSBA survey of Delegates, board presidents and superintendents identified the following top five areas in which they say flexibility is needed: reducing required instructional minutes or days, special education requirements, suspending pension rate increases, and reducing or eliminating routine restricted maintenance requirements.

***As CSBA continues advocating*** at the state and federal level for the funding schools require to reopen safely, board members and the education community can add their voices to the chorus using CSBA's funding advocacy toolkit at [www.csba.org/coronavirus](http://www.csba.org/coronavirus).