

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Lessons, Insights & Hopes for Reentry Planning
from the Large Countywide
and Suburban District Consortium



Background & Context

When the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly shut down schools nationwide, districts had to make rapid, significant changes nearly overnight. As the virus continued to spread, the challenge of making it through a spring of emergency distance learning was just the beginning for district leaders, who spent their summers prepping for an entirely new kind of school year. What drove their planning? What choices did they and their teams make, and why? Most importantly: how is it going so far? And what unforeseen challenges lie ahead? This brief highlights key insights, lessons learned, and core challenges of the members of the [Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium](#) as they prepared for and embarked on an unprecedented new school year. It is our hope that this document serves as a useful decision-making resource at the local, state, and national levels as our education ecosystem continues to respond to this ongoing crisis.

The Consortium is an invitational [network](#) of large, diverse, innovative, and leading suburban and countywide school districts dedicated to dramatically improving public education through collaboration, leadership, and advocacy. In total the Consortium districts educate **1.8 million students** with an average of **95,000 enrolled per member**; **61% are students of color**, and **41% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch**. The Consortium is managed by [EducationCounsel](#), an education advocacy and policy firm, and operates in affiliation with [AASA, The School Superintendents Association](#). This research project was conducted in partnership with [2Revolutions](#), a national education design lab, and through generous funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York.



Conducted between mid-August and September 2020, this research project encompassed an online review of all 18 member districts' [reentry plans](#) as well as interviews with superintendents and senior leaders from 13 Consortium districts. Our interview protocol focused on looking both retrospectively at the summer planning process and prospectively at the 2020-21 school year. Almost without exception, districts started the year virtually, and many had clearly articulated, public-facing plans with distinct phases for reopening grounded in health metrics that delineated which student populations would go back when. Most districts also presented an option for families to elect an all-remote experience for either the entire semester or even the entire school year—with some districts reporting over 50% of students opting into an all-remote model. Across the Consortium, we found that districts shared commonalities around prioritizing safety, equity, and authentic community engagement, but were more divergent around the ways in which they went about creating their reentry plans, identifying opportunities for innovation, and emphasizing capacity building for staff. Our key findings are organized into four buckets: process, innovation, equity, and looking ahead.

Key Findings

PROCESS How did districts go about creating and implementing their plans?

Collaboration, Integration, and Flexibility — Several districts incorporated existing district priorities (such as educator supports, family communication, or personalized options for students) and integrated them into their reentry planning to generate greater coherence amid what was otherwise a significantly fragmented situation. In addition, many districts seized the opportunity to form new structures, such as task forces and health advisory boards, in order to communicate and collaborate more effectively. Leaders recognized that “silos had to be collapsed” in order to “do right by all kids.” In most cases, being forced to work virtually opened the door for districts to break down those preexisting silos and democratize decision making more than ever. District leaders celebrated the “unprecedented collaboration” among their various departments, between schools and their central offices, and with other local government agencies. Consortium members anticipate these flatter, more inclusive collaboration structures are likely here to stay.

District highlight: Bellevue School District (WA) led their reentry planning steering committee in future-focused [visioning sessions](#) to answer the question, “One year from now, what do you want our students to say, think, and feel about how they were supported during this time?” The emerging priorities were anchored to the district’s existing long-term vision to create coherent guiding principles for reentry.

During our online review, we found that the accessibility of district plans and the ability to uncover the most up-to-date information varied. Districts that elected to create an all-in-one, dedicated website for the year made it easier to monitor the frequent changes and shifts to their plans than those that shared information in multiple places. These structures helped support districts’ ability to plan for the unpredictable. Many districts recognized that their reopening plans would likely only “look good on paper” and that “everything is subject to change.” They also highlighted that there are “no right decisions” and that it was important to give staff the “permission to fail.” District leaders who understood that frequently shifting data and information would be a consistent element throughout this school year were able to define dynamic processes that focused less on a rigid plan, and more on the flexibility to nimbly transition through multiple pivot points—as well as the ability to both establish expectations regarding the need for these pivots and to communicate these transitions more effectively to their communities.

“School districts in the next 12 months will be judged based on their ability to pivot between face to face and virtual learning; if they can’t do that seamlessly, the extent of how they do this well will be assessed. It won’t be graduation or performance rates, it will be based on how well the community perceives their ability to pivot back and forth. They will then be considered ‘good’ school districts. This [will be our] new binary.”

Inconsistent Guidance and Data Usage —

A lack of clear, consistent national and state guidance exacerbated what was already a complex, confusing and difficult decision-making process. Districts overcame this ambiguity in different ways. Certain districts, in the absence of such clear guidance, ended up positioning themselves as leaders for neighboring districts or banded together to create common decision frameworks to bring some coherence to their geographic areas. Most of the Consortium plans have similar goals and priorities—namely, health and safety, teaching and learning, and community engagement. Leaders only occasionally tapped into national reentry plan guidance (from national education organizations, health institutions, or other consulting firms) and instead relied heavily on community partnerships to ground reopening plans in county or city health metrics. Some pegged potential transitions to in-person learning to fixed periods of time, most commonly six weeks to one semester. Others adopted a “data not dates” approach. For the latter group, an unexpected but fairly common phenomenon developed: even when health metrics were largely agreed-upon by families and staff, once local data indicated a transition to in-person instruction was approaching, key stakeholders reversed course, demanding further delay before beginning in-person learning. The “polarizing” individual definitions of a safe in-person experience across each community—and the discrepancies between safety metrics in local, county, and state guidelines—meant that at each turn, districts face an unpredictable community reaction.



“What’s communicated on one news channel versus another has been more of a hurdle than we ever imagined.”

No Easy Answers — All districts cited the common challenges of the “impossible, no win” task of reentry planning. The pandemic has created a “toxic stew” of fear, mistrust, and uncertainty. This has created a number of common issues across districts—from difficulty securing firm commitments from families on their preferences for instructional models, to disagreements and misperceptions on scientific data or facts about the virus. Districts with staff and teacher unions frequently struggled to secure contract and health accommodation commitments so their “good on paper” plans could be appropriately staffed in reality. Additionally, the volatile national political landscape—and the use of school reopening plans as a frequent political talking point—further divided communities. This corresponded at the state level to frequently delayed or contradictory reopening guidance, oftentimes arriving well after districts had already finalized their plans. On top of this, many Consortium superintendents and senior leadership teams are already carrying impossible loads. Since superintendents have been forced into being the decision-makers for a health crisis, they now also bear the brunt of the community’s understandable frustrations and anger.

INNOVATION In what ways are districts pivoting and shifting in innovative ways?

Finding Opportunity in Crisis — Even as Consortium districts have navigated unprecedented and complex decisions, we found that most are also leveraging these unexpected circumstances in unique and innovative ways. For instance, several districts are rethinking staffing to deploy their non-instructional employees creatively, from using bus drivers as virtual learning monitors or meal distributors, to creating mentorship or outreach programs for at-risk high school students using reassigned classified staff. The pandemic has also generated innovative new services as districts respond to the need to be more agile and flexible. One district is exploring district-led “micro-pods” as a way to keep students in-district who are attracted by the learning pod movement. Another created a new [program](#) supporting family childcare needs by bringing a range of community partners together to meet demand.

“Covid is not check-the-box or fill-in-the-oval. It’s not rewarding kids who can do multiple choice questions. It’s critical thinking, creative thinking kids. Covid would never have come up on a standardized test. We need to stop preparing kids for a world they’re entering where the answers are not so simple.”

Sprinting Ahead — For many districts, this unique environment has also allowed them to move faster towards existing strategic goals, such as becoming a truly 1:1 device environment, fleshing out competency-based education across more grade bands, or rethinking assessment strategies. Additionally, districts report prioritizing the whole child in ways they haven’t necessarily been able to before—from childcare supports, to community-wide food banks, to broad family supports for mental health, to stronger trauma-informed approaches and social emotional support and integration during the school day. Districts are now, more than ever, becoming community hubs that support every aspect of their students’ lives. A few districts also highlighted a renewed importance on maintaining and supporting teacher and staff wellness and recognized the challenge of supporting an already burned-out workforce.



District highlight: Mesa Public Schools (AZ) created [school-based family support network \(FSN\) teams](#) to provide families with a single place to seek help with any issue or challenge, from internet access and food security to mental health and wellness. Families can contact the FSN teams directly or through a red [“help” button](#) on each school’s website, after which the teams triage the request to the appropriate staff member or partner agency.

Here to Stay — Most district leadership teams report that the impact of creating an all-virtual instructional model will assuredly ripple past this school year. Many districts are already seeing the long-term opportunities for flexible scheduling, sustained student connection, and uninterrupted learning—“snow days are a thing of the past.” West coast districts in the Consortium are already leveraging their new/improved virtual models to maintain instruction during the recent wildfires. Virtual opportunities have also expanded access to community engagement opportunities—holding virtual school board meetings or virtual open houses, for example, has upped the attendance rate exponentially in several districts. Other districts have expanded access to “inclusive communications” through dedicated virtual spaces, such as Facebook pages or Facebook Live events, in commonly spoken languages. Particularly for these large districts, meetings are “no longer confined” to the space constraints of a conference room. Meetings with principals have become easier to arrange and require less time away from their schools. Improving virtual models also has implications for class scheduling, affording districts the opportunity to explore hybrid options for their most popular (or hard-to-staff) courses. Years from now, the pandemic may be recognized as having unfurled multiple layers of innovation across the K12 education sector.

EQUITY How have districts centered equity in this process?

“I’m not sure we should return to normal because normal is a system that does not meet the needs of many students. We have to rethink things to address the problems we know are there. It’s hard to get there because the house is still on fire, but it’s the mindset we need to have.”



Exposing Inequities — The pandemic has “pulled back the curtain” on the inequities students struggle with every day, providing an increased focus on and attention to the structural inequities present in every district across the country. This crisis has exacerbated existing inequitable access to opportunity for marginalized students and families across our nation in such a way that we can no longer ignore. In some cases, individual districts distributed over two million meals and one hundred thousand devices in just a few months. There is increased realization that this is not just a school issue, but a whole community issue meriting a community response. As mentioned earlier, many Consortium districts are now informally operating under a community school model, developing partnerships and providing resources, food, technology, and supports to families in need. In addition, the definition of “1:1” has now expanded. Access to technology has always been a core focus for many districts, but there is now a broader focus beyond just giving each student a physical device. Districts now keenly understand the importance of the quality of that device, additional supports like headphones and chargers, and the student’s ability to access reliable high-speed internet.

Prioritizing the Most Vulnerable — Beyond the tangible supports highlighted above, many Consortium districts are applying a tiered approach in their return to in-person instruction that prioritizes those students who are furthest from opportunity. The prioritization varies across the districts, but students needing instructional accommodations (those with IEPs and/or English learners) were or will be most commonly the first to enter in-person instruction. There also appears to be a collective recognition by many districts of the value of transition years (Pre-K and/or Kindergarten, 6th grade, 9th grade, 12th grade), particularly at the elementary level. These prioritization schemas serve as a strategy for districts to ensure equitable access to opportunity for students whose learning is most severely impacted by the pandemic.

While this strategy is logical and centers equity in tangible ways, we also heard from some districts about the challenge of some of the most marginalized families not opting into in-person instruction for their students. As we are learning, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities—particularly on families of color. The real fear of endangering their physical safety has prompted some families to remain in a virtual learning context, regardless of the district's desire to prioritize those same students in the return to campus. Districts will continue to grapple with how to meet the needs of their students in ways that don't simply rely on a prioritization schema for in-person return. Instead, school and central staff need to think innovatively about how to deliver high-quality instruction in multiple modalities to meet priority students where they are. There remains a significant need (and opportunity) to learn more from districts about the ways in which equity is being prioritized within teaching and learning given both the pandemic and a national reckoning around racial injustice.

LOOKING AHEAD What are districts' core areas of focus going forward?

As the pandemic stretches on, districts to varying degrees remain in crisis mode, even as they have made strides towards a calmer, more stable state when compared with the spring. Frequent external changes, the ramifications of unfinished learning from the end of last school year, structural inequities, likely budget cuts, and teacher, principal, and central office attrition loom in significant ways over leaders and staff. Scheduling and staffing remain in flux, especially due to the logistical challenges and unpredictable human elements of toggling back and forth between virtual, hybrid, and in-person models. Indeed, districts that are currently providing in-person instruction successfully are in part only able to do so because so many families have opted into all-virtual options, which makes proper social distancing possible in school buildings. And the equity challenges, as shared above, remain persistently top of mind—especially as, for some Consortium districts, some students remain unable to consistently access meaningful instruction.



And yet, amid all the stress and tumult of the current moment, many are hopeful about the possibilities that lie ahead. Even though, for some districts, systemic transformation has not happened during the initial reentry period, many believe the opportunity has not yet passed them by. Some innovations are here to stay, and the pandemic has also opened new avenues and, in many communities, a greater appetite for trying new approaches. For example:

- As districts explore new ways to engage students, this is also an opportunity to think differently about instructional models, what we prioritize, and how we define student success.
- A renewed focus on capacity building affords the opportunity to rethink recruitment, hiring, training and retention of teachers and teacher leaders—what new knowledge, skills or mindsets do educators need to more effectively support learning during these unprecedented times? How can we rethink traditional instructional roles?
- Virtual collaboration has collapsed existing silos, allowing unprecedented opportunities for shared understanding, decision-making, and authentic community involvement.
- External silos have also broken down, and this, coupled with the greater recognition of the need to meet the whole child, has created the ability to more permanently develop sustainable community partnerships.

Across the country districts were knocked off equilibrium by the pandemic. Yet they've shifted decades-old practices overnight and are still very much navigating through the middle of this multi-layered crisis. District leaders have been doing their very best to make difficult, unprecedented decisions and prioritize students and staff during this time. The decisions these teams and communities make over the next year will influence whether we revert back to an old "normal" or seize this unexpected chance to leap forward. The biggest shifts may yet be unknown, but they will likely take place at every level of the education system. After accounting for basic needs and student and staff safety, one key priority must be at the level of teaching and learning—shifts in classroom practice that not only meet this moment, but truly meet the needs of all our students. We look forward to documenting their struggles and their progress, and sharing more lessons learned along the way. Whether it's adopting a Consortium member's approach or incorporating these insights into future planning and policy making, we hope these findings help to support the next wave of decisions and necessary pivots our education system will make to help each and every student reach their full potential.



"No organization with this type of complexity and sophistication has changed so dramatically to meet the needs of so many—and that is what's promising for public education moving forward."