

COVID-19 *TOTAL RESPONSE* SERIES

**Looking Beyond the Horizon:  
A Framework for Education  
System Planning and Redesign  
in the Midst of COVID-19**

April 2020



Laura Groth, EdD  
*Manhattan Strategy Group*  
Carol Cohen, MPP  
*Manhattan Strategy Group*  
Martin Orland, PhD  
*Manhattan Strategy Group*  
Kim Weis, MA  
*Center for Applied Research Solutions*  
Leora Ya'Acova Wolf-Prusan, EdD  
*Center for Applied Research Solutions*

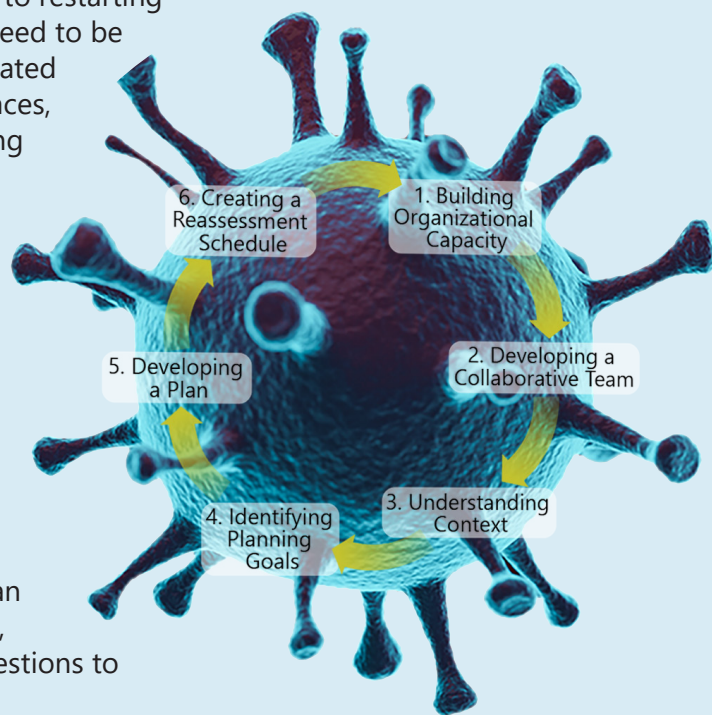
## Introduction

District teams convening in spring or summer of 2020 to plan for the upcoming school year will be doing so in the midst of a pandemic unprecedented in the modern era. Experienced educators will likely tell you that no year ever goes by exactly as envisioned. But imagine planning for a school year in which school leaders do not know, on any given day, what the reality will look like—including whether students will be in classrooms or in front of a computer, or even which teachers, staff, and students will be unavailable due to personal and family circumstances. Policymakers, education system leaders, teachers, and families will be preparing for a return to school long before we know exactly what even the basic elements of the next school year will look like – including the timing of the calendar or when the school buildings will be physically open. And yet, even as our nation grapples with the immediate crisis of COVID-19, now is the time to begin planning for the recovery and renewal that will begin during the next school year.

### **How can we support education system leaders that must confront ambiguity head on, set new goals, and redesign their education systems to ensure flexibility, effectiveness, and equity in the face of the unknown?**

This paper supports local education agencies, county or regional offices of education, and district and school leadership teams engaging in a formal planning process for the upcoming school year, providing a suggested structure and guiding questions as a collaborative exercise to grapple with these tough questions as they plan for the new year. In addition to restarting the instructional process, health and safety concerns will need to be prioritized, as new needs, mandates, and best practices related to social distancing and maintaining clean and healthy spaces, will likely continue to emerge throughout the year. Planning must also recognize the multi-level dynamic in which local education systems are operating, including federal and state policies, as well as the changing environments confronting businesses, higher education, and the myriad of other community partners.

The current pandemic may present multiple waves of crisis. It presents both an opportunity and an imperative for our nation’s school systems to learn from COVID-19 and improve our preparedness and response for future emergencies. In that spirit, this paper does not recommend or endorse specific action plans. Instead, we present a framework for how district and school leaders can work together to review short-term responses to the crisis, understand and analyze their new context, identify the questions to ask, and data to utilize to begin planning for SY 2020-21.



## Key Assumptions

We first posit three foundational assumptions and encourage education leaders to infuse these principles into their planning:

1. Recovery, renewal, and learning processes need to be **systemic**, looking inward as well as outward. This will require centering a holistic, whole-student and whole-school approach to recovery that considers instruction, socio-emotional, administrative, family and community engagement, and professional support efforts as interrelated components.

2. COVID-19 is a **community-wide crisis**, therefore, schools' recovery will be deeply embedded within community-wide recovery and will require engagement with a variety of internal and external partners.
3. The effects of COVID-19 will likely be most severe on historically disadvantaged, underserved, and marginalized communities, families, schools, and students. Therefore, our efforts to support recovery and renewal must center **equity** as a core component of the framework.

## The New Baseline: Current Conditions and Policies Affecting Education Systems in Spring 2020

Educators planning for SY 2020-21 face a substantially different context since in-school instruction ended. The "new normal" includes the following relevant education system challenges and responses to begin to address them.

### New Academic and Instructional Challenges

New academic and instructional challenges will create new pain points and exacerbate inequities that have long existed in America's public schools. Lost learning time, sometimes referred to as "summer melt" or "summer slide," will be greater this year due to the substantial amount of time students will have spent outside of schools. All students will experience delays and gaps in academic progress as their learning routines are disrupted and transitions to virtual instruction are rolled out imperfectly. This lost time will require school systems to think differently about how students are assessed and placed into courses, opportunities for remediation, and teachers' pedagogical approaches and evaluations. These challenges will be heightened by the lack of data, both from state assessments and in-classroom formative and summative assessments that traditionally would provide teachers and schools with the core knowledge of how to identify and serve students in need. Learning loss will not be consistent – it will likely be even more severe on educationally disadvantaged students, students without access to technology or with increased family obligations to balance with schoolwork, and those receiving specialized supports and services in schools, such as students with disabilities and English learners. Schools will need to address the structural inequities highlighted by these challenges.

### Heightened Needs for Social-Emotional Supports and Services

All members of the school community will have shared in the collective COVID-19 experiences of uncertainty, fear, and loss. Individuals experience these events not just as logistical challenges and disruptions to daily life, but as stressors that provoke a biological and neurological response to stress, repeated over several months. Trauma-informed approaches<sup>1</sup> and social-emotional learning can benefit all students, faculty, and staff by supporting their coping skills, resilience, and meaning-making. While this is a collective experience, members of the school community will be impacted differentially. Students with limited resources, preexisting mental and physical health challenges, and unsafe or unstable home conditions may experience more hardships during the crisis or more difficulty transitioning back to school routines. School staff and faculty will need additional preparation to identify, support, and refer students in distress, and school- and community-based services will need to be in place for students once they are referred.

<sup>1</sup> SAMHSA's six principles of a trauma-informed approach are Promoting Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration and Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice and Choice; and Addressing Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues. SAMHSA, 2014. <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>

## Increasing Federal Flexibility and Resources

Federal policy has moved to create significantly enhanced flexibility under federal programs for state and local education systems to respond to the COVID-19 emergency. Perhaps most notably, the U.S. Department of Education is allowing states to cancel standardized testing for the current school year. Other flexibilities are aimed at helping schools repurpose existing K-12 education funds for distance learning and move resources to areas of highest need. To assist with additional costs and reduced revenues from the emergency, the CARES Act authorizes \$30.75 billion in state aid through an Education Stabilization Fund; \$13.2 billion of this amount is for K-12 schools.<sup>2</sup>

## Significant New State Actions

State executive actions have focused on closing school buildings and moving to online learning. To date, 21 states and 3 U.S. territories have ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the academic year.<sup>3</sup> States are also issuing guidance for immediate district and school efforts to move to on-line learning, provide food for needy students, and deliver special education services. Some states have already taken steps to modify policies affecting graduation, end-of-course assessments, and educator preparation programs.<sup>4</sup>

## Changing Community Contexts

Many school systems have built substantive partnerships with community partners to provide student support services and reach students and families outside of the school setting. However, many community and business partners themselves will be affected by the impacts of economic downturn on local economies, leading to a reduced capacity to support school communities. For example, small businesses that previously partnered with schools for work study, internship, or career technical education support and placement may have closed or downsized in response to economic changes. Even as the demand for health and social services that community schools may have facilitated increases, with many businesses closed, unusually high levels of unemployment, and decreased tax revenues, many school systems will find themselves negotiating new areas of community need with less support from partner organizations.

# Planning for the Unknown: How Can Your Education System Plan for SY 2020–21?

## Getting Started: How Can You Reimagine Your Planning Process in the Face of COVID-19?

The framework and process below are informed by research on continuous improvement for education systems and emergency management and preparation for schools (See “For Further Reading”). Education systems can adapt this framework, which incorporates both steps for planning and preparing for emergencies and strategies for developing capacity, and structures for continuous improvement into a single set of processes.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/how-much-will-states-receive-through-the-education-stabilization-fund>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ecs.org/covid-19-update/>



1. *Ensure that you have the organizational capacity for learning and planning.* Planning for recovery takes dedicated time, resources, and attention to several structural components.

- Communicate clearly with all stakeholders and utilize distributed leadership and decision-making to build the communication structures and organizational capacity for responding to emergencies like COVID-19.
- Consider how you will commit the necessary resources, including financial supports, materials, and time, analytic capacity for data analysis, and professional development for capacity-building to engage in this work.
- Adjust your planning process as necessary and build in buffers of time and process flexibility to account for capacity shifts that may occur in times of ongoing emergency response and management. If your team is responsible for both long-term planning and immediate responses to emerging phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, take those capacity implications into account during your planning.
- Consider what structures will support school and district leaders and other partners coming together to design a systemic approach to recovery and renewal in the current context of COVID-19. Plan to incorporate family and student perspectives, especially around issues of access and equity that may have been heightened by COVID-19.

2. *Develop a collaborative team.* Building an inclusive team representing multiple perspectives, including educators and emergency management professionals, is critical to developing a successful plan with credibility in the school community.

- As you recruit your team, ensure that participants and partners represent diverse experiences and views and that populations most impacted by COVID-19 are represented.
- Recruit school counselors, community mental health providers, and crisis response teams and ensure their perspectives are incorporated throughout the process.



### About MSG

Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG), founded in 2001, is a management and social services consulting firm that works with federal, state, and local government agencies and their programs to achieve performance excellence. MSG works to improve education, workforce development, and human services for individuals with barriers to employment, for underserved populations, and for low-income communities, including our efforts on behalf of federal programs serving children, youth, and their families.

MSG core services include Technical Assistance, Research & Evaluation, Communication & Information, and Management & Technology. MSG has refined education capabilities in the areas of: assessing program and practitioner needs; fostering program and professional development; producing responsive grantee-centric technical assistance (TA) plans; aligning TA staff with the most appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively implement TA plans; identifying the most viable TA delivery approaches; determining the suitable level of intensity for TA delivery; documenting, tracking, and monitoring the provision of TA via our *TotalTA* platform; evaluating the impact of our TA delivery; and, measuring and reporting on required client outcomes tied to established standards and performance improvements.

With education experts on staff, access to many of the most influential thought leaders, researchers, and innovators in the education field, and with direct experience working with states to increase access to high quality early education programs and school readiness, MSG is poised and committed to make a positive difference for students and their families.

4340 East-West Highway, Suite 1100  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Office: 301.828.1515  
info@manhattanstrategy.com

[www.manhattanstrategy.com](http://www.manhattanstrategy.com)

- Review existing teams, such as Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) or Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) teams to provide additional support.
  - Establish a consensus around norms that will facilitate open and collaborative communication, and specific roles and responsibilities for moving plans forward.
3. *Understand your context.* Evaluate your external environment, including the needs of students and staff, the supports and challenges presented by the local economy and community, and changes in federal and state policies.
- Examine how changes in the environment due to COVID-19 have affected learning needs, both for students and for staff. Consider what data your system usually depends on to make key decisions, what data will be missing, and how you can compensate to make informed choices for the system and for individual students and professionals. Develop a plan for acquiring the data necessary to understand learning loss, gaps in service, remediation needs, competency and skill training needs, and other key questions your team articulates.
  - Understand how the context has changed social-emotional needs. Consider the social-emotional and behavioral interventions and frameworks (ISF, MTSS, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]) already being implemented in your school(s). Additional, more intensive (Tier 2 or 3) crisis and mental health interventions may be needed to fully respond to the breadth of student needs in recovery. Reflect as well on your local context. Communities that were already coping with historical, chronic, and structural violence, poverty, or disenfranchisement before the pandemic will continue to experience the pandemic through this lens. Social-emotional learning, community healing, and school connectedness efforts must recognize and respond to the unique ways that these cultural and community factors influence how students and families experience COVID-19.
  - Consider also how your system's history, professional capacity, size, resources, and student body will factor into each stage of planning for achieving short-term and long-term goals. For example, think about the resources required to reopen your school buildings when it is safe to do so, but also plan to incorporate lessons learned from virtual instruction into near-term activities and longer-term academic planning.
4. *Identify goals for the planning process and for the SY 2020-21.* Goal-setting represents a critical "north star" for any planning process, ensuring that your plans target the most important objectives. Tips for effective goal-setting include:
- Begin the planning process with a series of high-level visioning questions with your team. This exercise should take the context created by COVID-19 into account, but your high-level goals should not be limited by the current barriers and challenges.
  - Articulate the results of this visioning in a way that will guide the rest of your reflection, learning, and planning.
  - Determine what the outcome of your planning process should be. For example, decide whether you are creating one flexible plan that can adapt to a variety of scenarios throughout the year, or a series of plans that each respond to specific possible circumstances and scenarios.
5. *Develop your plan.* The following reflection questions are designed to help your team begin the process of strategizing the recovery, renewal, and preparation in the face of COVID-19:

### Centering Health and Safety

- What **new rules and practices** affecting the physical configurations of students, staff, and others in school buildings and related settings, such as schoolbuses or athletic fields, may be necessary to ensure the health and safety?
- How will your leadership team stay informed about **updated policies and best practices for safety and health**?
- Where can you build **flexibility into your schedule and budget** to plan for changes required to protect health and safety as they emerge?

### Assessing Student Needs

- How will you talk or problem-solve with your leaders and teachers about students returning to school with greater **differences in both academic and social-emotional needs** than before your school buildings closed?
- How will students with different socioeconomic characteristics, different demographics, and different communities be **affected differently** by the crisis?
- What were the impacts of school closure on historically disadvantaged populations, including **English learners and students with disabilities**? How will changes to school operations (e.g., longer school year) be addressed in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)?<sup>5</sup>
- Which students were served well during the COVID-19 response and who was not, and how might that data surface deeper **structural inequities** that require examination?

### Creating Responsive Supports, Services, and Systems

- How do your state and district crisis response, emergency management, and student support systems **coordinate and collaborate**?

<sup>5</sup> Belsha, K. (March 12, 2020). Schools that go 'remote' for coronavirus must keep serving students with disabilities. Can any really do it? *Chalkbeat*. <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2020/03/12/school-closures-coronavirus-remote-learning-students-with-disabilities/>

### The Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS)

is a California-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit training and TA provider that has been leading change for more than 30 years. CARS is committed to fostering effective, trauma-informed, culturally competent school mental health systems. CARS has provided training and TA on school mental health to numerous SEAs, LEAs, and schools through leadership of TA centers at the national, state, and county level, as well as through direct services contracts. CARS leads the SAMHSA-funded Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (PS MHTTC), which has a robust school mental health component at the regional and national levels. CARS previously led the SAMHSA-funded Now Is The Time TA (NITT-TA) Center (2014-2018), which supported 16 SEAs and more than 170 schools and community organizations funded through Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience Education) to expand mental health programs and services for school-aged youth.

The CARS team's expertise in crisis readiness, response, and recovery and emergency management in school and community settings is extensive. CARS staff oversaw delivery of trainings to nearly 10,000 educators, school leaders, school security staff, and first responders under the Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS). Through the NITT-TA Center, CARS provided intensive, ongoing TA to ten ReCAST (Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma) grantees nationwide in cities and counties that had recently experienced civil unrest, most of which within a context of historic and chronic inequity. CARS is also experienced with emergency management and crisis response at the college level through leadership of the statewide California Community Colleges Health & Wellness initiative, serving the nation's largest system of higher education.

708 College Avenue  
 Santa Rosa, CA, 95404  
 Office: 877.568.4227

[cars-rp.org](https://cars-rp.org)

- What **virtual, personalized, or competency-based resources** has your system been using to serve students? What resources are working well, and how can those resources be incorporated into the new school year?
- How has the experience of COVID-19 impacted your students, teachers, staff? How can you integrate a **trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches** into policies, practices, and programs to navigate recovery?

### ***Making Data Useful***

- How will your system be impacted by the pause in **state accountability data** and summative assessments? In the absence of this data, how might you reimagine and redesign how to place and track students in their coursework progression for college and career readiness?
- What **early warning systems** for reviewing student data and identifying students who are at risk of failure, dropping out, or not graduating do you currently have in place that may be able to be adapted for new data and thresholds for concern during COVID-19?

### ***Addressing School Staff and Culture***

- How are you conducting outreach with your **staff**, and what staff or teacher skills or competency gaps have emerged during this time, either due to new skill requirements for teachers transitioning to virtual instruction, changing needs of the student body, or to a lack of access to continuing education or advanced training?
  - What do you want your district and **school culture** to look like, and what are the key components of that culture in both virtual and classroom settings? For example, how are you working to prevent and disrupt cyberbullying and discrimination in virtual learning spaces?
6. ***Create a schedule for revisiting your plan and goals.*** As planning is an iterative process, you will need to commit to revisit and adjust for evolving circumstances on a regular basis to:
- Consider how different strategies are working or need adjustments.
  - Reassess your emergency preparedness plan as new information becomes available.

## **Where to Go from Here? Action Steps and Additional Resources**

Translating a planning exercise into concrete, sustainable actions is no small feat. District and school leaders may find that they require external supports as they consider potentially significant redesigns to traditional systems. Looking forward, consider how your team can:

1. ***Plan for continuous improvement and emergency preparedness.*** Agree to a series of times during the summer and school year to revisit your plan, discuss strategies, successes, and failures, and agree as a team to revisit every strategy as an opportunity for learning. Develop a consensus that the lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis will inform improvements throughout the school system and agree to a plan for building that learning into the typical school calendar.
2. ***Ensure that a specific team has responsibility for codifying lessons learned from COVID-19 and disseminating those throughout your system.*** Make sure that teachers, families, and other partners understand your lessons learned, planned actions, and new directions.
3. ***Ensure you have a process in place for sharing plans for additional waves of school closures or future emergencies.***



Schools will benefit from outside crisis planning technical assistance (TA), while simultaneously transitioning back into school routines. They will need to navigate conflicting demands to accelerate learning and extend instructional hours while also responding to heightened student and teacher stress, uncertainty, and anxiety; preparing for future waves of school closures or stay-at-home orders; and planning for crises beyond COVID-19. TA can support school leadership to prioritize student mental health, school climate, and social-emotional learning as crucial elements of student learning and academic planning. While many students will have the coping skills and resources they need, some students and staff will be challenged. Schools will benefit from assistance with identifying which students need more intensive supports. This will include students struggling with grief and loss.

There is no business as usual anymore. The next school year will be an unprecedented test of our nation's schools and educators, in their capacity to embrace ambiguity and continuous change while addressing serious threats to our communities, families, schools, and students. No one has the answers yet, and the answers will vary among systems and schools. This paper includes some supports to get started, from how to bring the right team together, methods for accessing outside expertise, and a framework of guiding questions to kick off your problem-solving and planning. We hope that this framework helps leaders build a bridge from the current crisis response to both short- and long-term plans that address the unknown head on, providing a framework of creativity and ingenuity to determine how to best serve students, families, teachers, schools, and communities.

## For Further Reading

### Continuous improvement capacity and structures for program quality:

[Derrick-Mills, Teresa, Heather Sandstrom, Sarah Pettijohn, Saunji Fyffe, and Jeremy Koulish. \(2014\). Data Use for Continuous Quality Improvement: What the Head Start Field Can Learn From Other Disciplines, A Literature Review and Conceptual Framework. OPR](#)

### Planning for emergency preparedness:

[U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans, Washington, D.C. 2019](#)

### COVID-19 resources for schools:

U.S. Department of Education, [COVID-19 \("Coronavirus"\) Information and Resources for Schools and School Personnel](#)

Education Commission of the States, [COVID-19 Update: State Policy Responses and Other Executive Actions to the Coronavirus in Public Schools](#)

Center on Reinventing Public Education, [District Responses to COVID-19 School Closures](#)

### Creating trauma-informed policies, practices, and approaches:

Wolf-Prusan, Leora, Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, [Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: A Practice Guide for School and Mental Health Leadership](#)

[Responding to COVID-19 | School Mental Health](#). Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network. [Page updated on ongoing basis.]

[CASEL CARES](#). Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). [Page updated on ongoing basis.]

Adolescent Health Working Group, 2013, [Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit](#)