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PASA POINTS

The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators

About PASA

The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) is an organization that is instrumental in developing successful school leadership through advocacy, support, sustainment of high-quality school administrators and a statewide collegial network.

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School leaders are adjusting district plans to the constant updates of state and national guidance on reopening schools.

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The Evolving Challenges of Reopening Schools

The summer of 2020 has been extremely challenging for school leaders across the Commonwealth as they endeavor to safely reopen their schools this fall. Amid constant updates to federal and state communications, superintendents and school board members have been scrambling to develop reopening plans since early June. The situation has been extremely fluid and frustrating. School leaders have received the following:

- **May 19:** The Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued “considerations” to open schools.
- **June 6:** The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) released “preliminary guidance” for school districts to reopen schools including the requirement that districts develop a Health and Safety Plan approved by the local school board and sent to PDE.
- **June 24:** PDE released a research report by Mathematica that provided “Considerations for Reopening Schools”. The report showed that hybrid and remote learning options result in the least amount of virus transmission.
- **July 1:** The Secretary of Health issued a mandatory mask order that includes all Pre-K to 12 students to wear masks in schools with some exceptions.
- **July 14:** PDE issued guidance on “Emergency Instructional Time” accounting procedures for school districts.
- **July 16:** The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and PDE jointly issued “Pre-K to 12 Guidance” to reopen schools. The introduction to the guidance states, “The science and public health conditions surrounding COVID-19 are continually evolving. This guidance will be updated as necessary when new information becomes available.”

PASA and school leaders are appreciative of the efforts by CDC, PDE, DOH, and other agencies to provide guidance to help plan for the new year. However, most of what has been issued are suggestions without specificity, leaving difficult decisions for school leaders who are not public health experts. The sand has been constantly shifting beneath the feet of school officials as information about and guidance concerning the Coronavirus continues to change. As a result, the public health situation could look much different in late August than it does now, causing districts to suddenly shift their reopening plans and create tremendous disruption to communities and families.

Additional Resources and Supporting School District Leaders

PASA and several other education agencies have worked together since the school closure occurred in March to provide as much assistance and information as possible to school leaders. On June 18, the Pennsylvania School Reopening Task Force Report was issued jointly by eight education associations to assist school districts with their reopening plans: <https://www.pasa-net.org/Files/Coronavirus/SchoolReopeningReport.pdf>. This 138-page document provided school officials with a comprehensive overview of specific operational areas to consider in planning for the coming year.

PASA has built a comprehensive webpage that includes information on the pandemic for school leaders to use as a resource. This webpage was featured in our national affiliate's newsletter (AASA) as an exemplary resource for schools: <https://www.pasa-net.org/coronavirus>. This webpage has been updated on a regular basis to provide school leaders with the updated information to assist them with their planning.

PASA has also conducted numerous briefings through virtual video calls for school district leaders since mid-March. The briefings provide an overview of the latest information from state and federal sources that directly impacts school districts because of the pandemic and give superintendents and school leaders the opportunity to hear information, ask questions, and receive timely response. Briefings are recorded and posted for later review by school leaders in the event they could not participate during the call and will be continuing through the summer as new information is posted or as events warrant.

School officials have an abundance of information to review and consider in their planning process. However, they do not have clear and specific details to assist them in making daily school operational decisions that could potentially impact the lives of the children and staff they serve. This is causing great anxiety and frustration.

Unfortunately, school officials are fighting the clock in terms of school opening and the submission of their health and safety plans. As the month of August and the school safety plan deadline looms ahead, school districts are left to answer questions that would be better answered by epidemiologists and public health officials. For example, the latest state guidance issued on July 16 states that "student desks should be placed 6 feet apart or to the maximum extent feasible." The operational question asked by school leaders is what does "maximum extent feasible" mean? If a district's facility only allows for 5 feet of separation, is that acceptable? Will this create a liability for the district and the community? These questions and more need to be answered by public health officials to help districts open their doors safely.

School leaders have been given the unprecedented responsibility to open their schools safely during a pandemic. It has been extremely difficult to make plans when the public health information about the virus changes on a regular basis and guidance continues to evolve. Everyone wants to see schools open and get back to a sense of normalcy to provide stability to students and their families. The question remains as to who should be making decisions about safely operating our schools during a pandemic.

One thing is clear during this pandemic: there are no great solutions, and not every parent will agree with decisions made by their elected officials, their local school board members or the Governor. PASA is confident that school leaders will do their best to make sound decisions regarding opening their schools based on the information they have been provided from the Departments of Health and Education. To our legislators, we ask that you understand and respect the challenging work being done in our public schools and support school leaders as they continue to make difficult but essential decisions aimed at keeping our students and their families healthy and safe.