

A Phased-In Approach to Safely Reopening Vermont's Schools

Vermont-NEA is proposing a return to in-person instruction in four phases, in combination with distance and hybrid learning models, expanded social and mental health services, local safety-and-health committees, instructional planning to address racial and social inequities, expanded staffing to provide essential services, facility preparations, and more guidance and assistance to special educators.

1. **Phase One:** Educators, Educational Support Professionals (ESP), school administrators and all other relevant personnel, including substitutes, will be accorded uninterrupted, non-instructional time together without students to prepare for the eventual reopening of school. They will plan intensively for distance teaching/learning as part of a hybrid model or in full remote mode, depending on pandemic conditions and other contingencies; participate in staff trainings (inclusive of substitutes) on health and safety and other matters; and facilitate or become familiar with general pandemic-response preparations and systems in each school.

This time will also be used to negotiate Memorandums of Understanding between school districts and local unions on working conditions and all relevant matters covered by local collective bargaining agreements in response to the impacts of COVID-19.

Duration: Two weeks (late August – September 8).

2. **Phase Two:** Educators, ESP and school administrators will meet with students and families, in person and/or remotely, as public health factors and local circumstances allow. This time, in addition to reconnecting with students, families and colleagues, and progressing further with pandemic preparations, will be devoted to:
 - Reviewing protocols and systems for handling COVID-19 infections and other illnesses; for cleaning and disinfecting and for protecting staff and students from unnecessary exposure to cleaning and disinfectant solutions; for mask wearing and PPE storage and distribution; for testing and contact tracing, quarantining, daily health checks and hygiene practices; for the careful management of “podding,” the movement and congregation of students in classrooms, hallways, gyms, and playgrounds; for student socializing and play; for enforcement in school of the six-foot, physical distancing mandate; for conducting medical isolation in the event of illness; for closing school again for any duration of time if required; for securing mental health services; for food preparation, delivery, and eating; and for the use of substitute personnel to cover or assist with the duties of regular staff
 - Scheduling social-emotional wellness checks with students and staff

- Conducting needs assessments with students and families, with special attention paid to those who have personally experienced social, medical, and educational hardships because of the pandemic and may require more academic and social services
- Deciding how best to meet the needs and aspirations of students who qualify for special education services or are English Language Learners
- Developing instructional plans, whether in-person or virtual, that address racial and social equity in the provision of instruction and support services
- Evaluating each family's technological needs and proficiencies and educating students and parents/caregivers on the use of computers/tablets and on-line programs to learn effectively at school and at home
- Explaining academic programs, courses, grading and competency assessments, and standardized testing requirements
- Explaining extracurricular offerings and conditions for safe participation
- Distributing books, computer tablets, and other required resources
- Orienting parents/caregivers, students and staff to school communication and feedback systems

Duration: This work will proceed until completed, and until school districts can certify that they are ready to transition to phase three.

3. **Phase Three:** Student instruction resumes, in person, fully remote, or hybrid. The transition to this phase will be predicated on each school district formally verifying to the Agency of Education that its reopening plan is complete, that in-person learning and other activities will be conducted in strict adherence to all COVID-19 public health mandates, and that the following metrics on health and safety, facility engineering, student transportation, and staffing are fully met:

- There is minimally one school nurse on duty full time in each school building. More nurses may be required per building depending on the number of staff and students and local pandemic conditions. School districts will consult with public health officials and the Vermont State School Nurses Association for guidance on nurse staffing levels.
- Each school building has sufficient custodial staff on site each day to conduct deep cleaning and disinfecting of all occupied classrooms and other spaces, and to respond to facility or vehicular emergencies. Protocols are in place for daily cleaning and disinfecting of school spaces, as well as more frequent cleaning of high-touch surfaces and frequently used areas such as bathrooms.
- All bathrooms are fully operational, there is access to warm water and soap in each, and directions on handwashing are posted in each and written in a language(s) that students understand.

- Routine testing is available for staff and students when requested, and robust contact tracing can be conducted by public health officials.
- Plans exist for conducting daily health checks of students and staff, and for the respectful and safe isolation of staff and students who fall ill.
- Procedures are in place to ensure that everyone – students, staff, and visitors – wears appropriate face coverings in schools and observes the six-foot, physical distancing rule. The school district will also certify that it is equipped and prepared to supply face coverings.
- Policies are established for how protective measures will be enforced consistently, ensuring that disparate discipline of students and staff does not occur.
- There is a system for the procurement, storage and distribution of masks, gloves and other necessary personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfectant solutions, hand-sanitation products of at least 60 percent alcohol, pedal-operated garbage bins, classroom storage units for cleaning and disinfectant solutions, and window fans or air conditioners for the warm months. Additionally, there is a back-up system in place for procuring masks, gloves, and other necessary PPE, plus cleaning and disinfecting supplies, in the event the school's primary supplier is unable to fill orders.
- Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems have been inspected and tested, and, where required, have been retrofitted or modified to increase air flow, air filtration and circulation of clean air.
- A Health & Safety Committee has been established at the district level to monitor health and safety conditions and resource allocations, and to assist in the resolution of problems and address concerns raised by staff, students, and families. This body will be chaired or co-chaired by a school nurse, and will include the superintendent, school principals, and union-appointed educators and support personnel from each school building, including custodians and bus drivers. The membership, meeting schedule, responsibilities, and procedures for communicating with the committee have been disseminated to all staff and parents/caregivers.
- Comprehensive training on health and safety matters, transportation, facility engineering and cleaning/disinfecting has been conducted for all school personnel, including substitutes. The district will certify in this respect that the training it provided was targeted to specific job duties and was in addition to that currently available on-line from the Vermont Occupational Safety and Health Administration (VOSHA).

- Plans exist for closing school buildings or areas of buildings to contain potential outbreaks.
 - Plans exist for continuity of instruction through substitutes or other instruction when teachers or instructional support staff must quarantine, or when in-person instruction must be closed.
 - Plans exist for continuity of nutrition and support services for all students if in-person learning must be suspended.
 - Remote/alternative work assignments have been instituted for staff who are at risk of contracting COVID-19 by virtue of age or medical conditions, or who live with or care for someone at risk because of age or medical conditions, or who requested such accommodations because of childcare concerns or other reasons.
 - There are policies and procedures for:
 - Hiring, training and supervising attendants to assist drivers on reconfiguring seating and protecting students during transportation runs, especially in respect to mask wearing and observing state-mandated, physical distancing rules on school vehicles.
 - Addressing the socio-emotional and mental health needs of staff and students compassionately and confidentially.
 - Hiring, training, and deploying substitute staff for each school building, and for supervising and evaluating their work.
4. **Phase Four:** School districts and staff, in collaboration with families and public health officials, will continually assess where things stand with in-person learning and other programs in light of local, regional and state health data, educational progress and equity objectives, socio-emotional wellness, and the general welfare of students, staff and families.

Establish a COVID-19 State Commission on Reopening Schools & Educational Crisis Services

Vermont-NEA urges the Governor Phil Scott and the Agency of Education to reconsider their opposition to a State Commission comprised of educators, school counselors, school nurses, educational support professionals, custodians and bus drivers, administrators, school board members, parents/caregivers, and AOE representatives. The commission is essential to facilitating a safe reopening of schools, and to providing expert guidance to school districts and their staff over the course of the 2020-21 school year on matters of common concern.

Special Education Teachers Need More Guidance & Support

Vermont-NEA has called attention since last spring to the unique and difficult challenges faced by special educators and their students in the time of COVID-19. Our colleagues who work with children entitled to special education services and their families continue to plead with us to secure additional AOE guidance, resources, and accommodations so they can meet their legal, professional, and ethical responsibilities.