

*“Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, acting, living! It is possible to live differently in this world.”* Pope Francis

# RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

**Strategies and Action Plans for Education  
2020-2021**



Office of Education,  
Evangelization and Catechesis

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ARCHDIOCESE  
*of* HARTFORD

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***"Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself ... But that takes audacity and courage." Pope Francis***

*The world as we know it changed significantly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring the closure of all Connecticut schools after Friday, March 13, and creating the need for a sudden shift to remote learning. The Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Hartford responded quickly and efficiently to this new reality, greeting their students virtually on Monday, March 16 and moving confidently forward with continuous instruction.*

*Throughout the last several months of the 2020 school year, our students experienced no loss of learning as their teachers adapted to the new format and embraced teaching remotely. Staff of the Archdiocesan education office met weekly with all school administrators to share support and best practices in remote learning, and created an online information hub, providing educators with extensive resources. Schools ensured that all students had access to Chromebooks, iPads, or tablets and maintained regular interaction with parents regarding student progress. The integrity of the academic program was sustained and student assessment remained grade-based.*

*Catholic schools in the Archdiocese are also well positioned to address the social/emotional wellbeing of students, and this was carefully cultivated through personal interaction with teachers and classmates, and through daily participation in faith formation. Online Masses, prayer services, and sharing of intentions enriched this difficult period for every school. Paramount to all else, our schools remain committed to building community whether remotely or in-person. Building community reinforces we are one family united in Christ. Our schools nurture a culture of inclusiveness and justice, mindful that students may return to school in need of healing in mind and heart.*

*Our schools have met and overcome the challenges presented by this pandemic. There is no way to know with any certainty what the next school year will bring, however the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Hartford stand ready to fully address and meet the educational needs of their students, both in person and remotely, while ensuring that health and safety remain the priority. Each school has prepared a plan for returning to in-person instruction and shared it with their communities well in advance of the start of the school year.*

*The following strategies and guidelines outline common standards and expectations that all Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Hartford have included in their respective school plans to ensure a safe, healthy, and academically rigorous school year regardless of the platform or environment in which the students will learn. Each school's plan is tailored specifically for their building and school community.*

*Our priority remains the same - to teach to the whole child: mind, body and spirit. We are proud of the outstanding performance of our schools and their students during this period of great challenge. While we don't always know what the future will bring, we are confident that our students will meet any task they encounter with perseverance, knowledge, and success, poised to meet the future with boundless hope.*



## CREATE A TASKFORCE AND ACTION PLAN

Each school has created a task force committee to help lead development of a Return to In-Person Instruction Strategies (RIIS). No one single person should be required to develop and implement a school plan. A school taskforce includes stakeholders from across the school community including health professionals, administrators, educators, parents, School Board members, or members of the local community.

Each school plan is informed by the guidelines created by the Office of Education, Evangelization and Catechesis (OEEC) and reflects best practices disseminated by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Department of Public Health (DPH), and the CT State Department of Education (CSDE). The ultimate goal is to develop, after reviewing the recommendations of all the research, a comprehensive school plan that will minimize the influence of COVID-19 on the educational experience and programs of our students, their families, and our faculty and staff.

The work of the taskforce is to develop a specific school action plan that includes strategies for three possible learning environments this coming school year. The action plan will include strategies for the following phases:

- **GREEN** Phase: *low risk* – allows for a full in-person learning environment with specific health and safety measures in place.
- **YELLOW** Phase: *moderate risk* – allows for a hybrid or blended learning environment, part in-person and part-remote, which accommodates a need for reduced building capacity. All safety measures during GREEN phase apply.
- **RED** Phase: *high risk* – provides for full remote learning.

The taskforce will monitor transitions from in-person to remote learning and back to the classrooms, determine necessary health and safety protocols, and proactively prepare to respond to issues as they arise. Decisions made to transition from one phase to another will be driven by data received from the CDC and the CT DPH and informed by results of scientific based research.

## DEFINITIONS

**Remote Learning** - Remote learning provides an opportunity for students and teachers to remain connected and engaged with the content while working from their homes or a location off school campus. It involves both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Remote learning is something a school should be able to switch off and on based on need.

It is different from distance learning that typically has gone through an official process of establishing a school, adopting an online curriculum, and creating a dedicated structure to support students enrolled in a distance learning program.

“Transitioning to remote learning can keep students on track so that when they return to physical school environments, they will not need to complete a lot of make-up work to be ready for any scheduled assessments. Many of the requirements in a traditional classroom environment will be in play for remote learning environments, and the goal is to adhere to as many state and local requirements as possible” (Kay, 2020).

It is important to note that in remote learning environments, versus distance learning environments, the learner and teacher are not typically accustomed to having distance during instruction. Remote learning is designed to be able to transition back to in-person instruction at any time.

**Remote Synchronous Instruction** – Two-way, real-time/live, online instruction between teachers and students when students are not on campus. In this method, the required amount of instructional time is scheduled each day. Synchronous instruction is provided through a computer or other electronic device or over the phone. The teacher may also schedule live, synchronous one-on-one or small group sessions. All instructional methods must address the required curriculum for each specific content area.

Examples of synchronous activities may include:

- Scheduled live class time with the whole group
- Scheduled one-on-one or small group sessions
- Scheduled quizzes and tests
- Scheduled collaborative discussion time for students to share ideas
- Live streamed lectures or demonstrations of skills and assignments

**Remote Asynchronous Instruction** – Instruction that does not require having the teacher and students engaged at the same time. In this method, students learn from instruction that is not necessarily being delivered in-person or in real time. This type of instruction may include various forms of digital and online learning, such as prerecorded video lessons or online posted learning tasks that students complete on their own. Pre-assigned work and formative assessments are integral parts of an asynchronous assignment. Instructional methods must address the required curriculum for each specific content area.

### Examples of Asynchronous Activities<sup>1</sup> May Be:

- **Videos:** Turn in-class lectures into videos by recording your teaching. For best results, you can combine video with documents, text, photos, and slides for a full presentation.
- **Demonstrations:** Sometimes students need to see something in action. Post an existing video that shows a skill, or make your own and publish it on YouTube. Consider using the transcript tool to make a text copy for student reference.
- **Group Projects:** Your students don't have to be in the same room to work together. Group presentations and reports can be edited using Google Docs or Dropbox for real-time collaboration and commenting.
- **Learning Activities:** Your students need to apply what they've picked up in your online materials, so try creating quizzes and games that let them practice their skills and get feedback on what they know--and what needs work.

## COMMON STANDARDS FOR REMOTE LEARNING

- Every class will adopt both synchronous and asynchronous instructional methods.
- Each school may adopt the online learning platform that best suits the training of its teachers and needs of the students such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Apple Classroom, or SeeSaw.
- For scheduled synchronous learning, individual classes may select from technologies such as Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or the like that provide online whole class learning environments.
- Opportunities for synchronous learning must take place **at least 4 times a week** in any grade that has to transition to remote learning.

## GENERAL EXPECTATIONS FOR REMOTE LEARNING

This coming school year presents the possibility of having to transition to a remote learning environment, distinctly different from a distance learning environment. In a remote learning setting, our goal is to mirror a typical in-person day to the extent possible. The following expectations provide guidelines for students and teachers.

- Each course/subject will have a live, synchronous component.
- Class routines and schedules should be determined and adhered to throughout the remote learning period.

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<sup>1</sup> Schoology Exchange, <https://www.schoology.com>

- Classes will begin on time.
- Assignments are expected to be completed in the allotted amount of time, as is the expectation in school, adhering to appropriate deadlines for remote learning environments.
- All classes will be recorded.
- Students should give their best effort, exhibit appropriate online class conduct, and attend classes regularly, health permitting.
- Students should attend online classes in school uniform or appropriate clothes for school. Schools will establish dress codes for attending online classes. (While shoes are optional, pajamas are not considered appropriate school clothes.)
- Students should sign on from their remote location in a room that is distraction-free and conducive for studying and learning, preferably not a bedroom.
- Students should have their cell phones in a different room during class time.
- Stay in contact! Teachers will stay in touch with students and students should stay in contact with their teacher(s).

## **SCHEDULES**

The following schedule of remote learning classes is recommended at each grade level:

### **\*Pre-Kindergarten**

- Pre-kindergarten programs may continue to operate in schools during the green, red or yellow phase. The only exception to this is if the governor closes down all day care centers in the state due to significant increase in virus data.
- Teachers and aides are expected to wear masks. Children should be taught how to wear a mask, however, are not required to wear masks while indoors.
- Teachers must make every effort to promote social distancing to the extent possible at this age level.

### **Kindergarten Through Grade 3**

- *Kindergarten is encouraged to remain open during the yellow phase.* If schools are required to minimize building capacity, kindergarten should remain in person at least four days a week.
- Kindergarten must transition to remote learning in a red phase.
- Synchronous live, whole group instruction will occur at least 4 days a week for K-3 and will schedule time for religion, all the English language arts, math, and alternate science and social studies. Interdisciplinary instruction should be planned to the extent possible.
- Small group and differentiated instruction for individual students should be scheduled as part of synchronous learning times as often as necessary.
- Live session for specials will occur as directed by the school leader.

## **Grades 4 and 5**

- Synchronous live whole group instruction will occur at least 4 days a week and will schedule time for religion, all the English language arts, math, and alternate science and social studies. Interdisciplinary instruction should be intentionally planned in each designed unit to the extent possible.
- Small group and differentiated instruction for individual students should be scheduled as part of synchronous learning times at least twice a week.
- Asynchronous learning will take place to schedule time for independent project work or completion of assignments.
- Live session for specials will occur as directed by the school leader.

## **Middle School**

- Synchronous, live whole group instruction will occur at least twice a week in each content area (ELA and Literature may be combined in one block period of time).
- Small group and differentiated instruction for individual students should be scheduled as part of synchronous learning times as often as necessary.
- Students may receive individual or small group instruction in any content area as needed, at the discretion of the teacher and/or school leader.
- Asynchronous learning will take place to schedule time for independent project work or completion of assignments.
- Live session for specials will occur as directed by the school leader.

## **High School**

- Students will follow their daily class schedules in block format as directed by each high school.

## **DAILY TIME ALLOTMENTS**

In a remote or blended learning environment, considerations must be taken regarding recommended screen time at various age levels. Balancing synchronous and asynchronous instruction is imperative. Keeping this in mind while complying with minimal instructional minutes to constitute a school day, the following *guidelines* should be used in a remote learning phase:

- Kindergarten through 2nd grade – minimum 90 instructional minutes (not necessarily consecutive)
- 3rd through 5th grade – minimum 180 instructional minutes (not necessarily consecutive)
- 6th through 12th grade – minimum 240 instructional minutes (not necessarily consecutive)

*Seeking a balance between academic growth and social-emotional development, middle schools and high schools may want to consider postponing remote start times to 9:00AM.*

## Lesson Content

Transitioning to remote learning can be extremely successful if sufficient time for planning is provided. Remote learning does not suggest that the integrity or rigor of any one content area should be compromised or sacrificed. Content needs to be engaging, align with existing lessons, and should be easy to navigate for both teacher and student. In a remote setting, it is the intent to ensure a continuum of learning, advancing the curriculum at each grade level.

Many students are now familiar with digital content but may not be accustomed to the methods this year's teachers may employ. The more confident teachers are with the platform they choose to use to teach a content, the more effectively they will teach the students. To the greatest extent possible, students must effectively grasp the content and successfully engage in learning to demonstrate mastery of skills and objectives taught. Using existing digital resources that are familiar such as subscriptions or accompanying text adoptions, are the best options for beginning remote learning. "Remember, the goal is to be as seamless as possible in covering the curriculum and the least disruptive to lesson and unit flow."

Lessons should be planned as *units* to establish the broad standards with integration of Catholic social teachings, objectives, and specific skills students will need to master to successfully learn the objective. Units of study should incorporate essential learning targets as well as formative and summative assessments that can be used in a remote or in-person classroom setting.

Teaching in a remote environment is harder and learning takes longer. Grading in a remote learning setting will not look the same as an assessment administered in-person. Plan for teaching the essential learning targets and how students will be able to demonstrate understanding remotely. AOH curriculum was written to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum as designed for in-person learning. For remote settings, strategic decisions must be made about prioritizing what is essential for students to know in order to advance their understanding and knowledge of a content area. In other words, not everything is assessed in isolation or separately.

Applying knowledge in long or short-term project or performance-based assessments is one strategy that works well and removes the opportunity for students to use work that may not be uniquely theirs. A great resource for teachers is <https://my.pblworks.org/projects> .

## PHYSICAL LAYOUT AND HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

The goal of all our schools is to bring all students back for in-person instruction to the extent that each school provides for the safety and health of students and staff. The CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics have published a statement that acknowledges the importance of students resuming their education in an in-person setting and the harm that will result from further remote learning and isolation from their peers and other adults. (Appendix A)



Specific protocols are being instituted in each school that have proven effective to minimize or negate the risk of transmission of COVID-19, as well as other harmful viruses. The following accommodations are required in each school building:

### **MASKS**

- All adults who enter the building must wear a mask or be supplied with a face covering that covers their nose and mouth.
- Students in grades K-12 must wear masks during the school day with scheduled mask breaks. Students are asked to bring their own masks to school. Schools will maintain a supply of extra masks for students as needed.
- All students and staff who are able to be compliant with cloth face coverings or masks will be asked to wear them over their nose and mouth, particularly when in close proximity to other staff and students where social distancing is not possible. Certain exceptions to this requirement include anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.
- All students and staff must wear masks at all times when in common areas of the school building including hallways, stairwells, restrooms, and other common areas.

### **PHYSICAL DISTANCING**

- Classes will utilize outdoor space when possible.
- Unnecessary furniture, rugs, and items that cannot be easily sanitized will be removed.
- Desks will be spaced three to six feet apart.
- If a small group meeting takes place, students will be required to wear masks and sit three to six feet apart.
- Classes will be organized into cohorts or “bubbles” to minimize crossover among students and adults within the school.
- To the extent possible, students will remain in one classroom to contain the use of desks and other resources to one cohort of students.
- Schools will stagger opening days to allow small cohorts to enter school prior to full attendance to understand the new protocols and policies in place as well the change in routines.
- Schools are encouraged to stagger the start time of different cohorts throughout the school year to minimize the number of students entering the school at one time.
- One-way flow procedures will be established in hallways and stairwells to the extent possible.
- Students' movements will be limited throughout the school building.
- Schools will establish procedures for limiting proximity while using cubicles and/or lockers.

## **CLEANING & SANITIZING**

- Sanitizing stations will be set up at all entrances to the school.
- All playground equipment will be cleaned after each cohort of students uses equipment in recess or physical education.
- Each student will have his/her own set of classroom manipulatives and/or supplies. Shared supplies among student will be prohibited to the extent feasible. Any shared item will be disinfected between use.
- Access to frequent handwashing and/or sanitizing stations in or near classrooms and common areas will be provided.
- Restrooms will be cleaned at least twice a day.
- If students eat lunch in their classroom, desks will be cleaned before and after lunch. Students who eat in a cafeteria will be seated six feet apart.
- Desks and commonly touched surfaces will be cleaned at the end of every school day. Schools will follow CSDE recommendations for cleaning and sanitizing. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/FAQ-schools-child-care.pdf> )
- Schools are strongly advised against using a fogger to disinfect. UV lights and electrostatic disinfecting machines are most effective, however, Lysol also disinfects effectively.

*Note: DPH advises against disinfectant fogging/misting/spraying machines in schools and office buildings for several reasons. Disinfectant products are not benign and many are known to be respiratory and dermal (skin) sensitizers and asthmagens. The spraying or fogging of disinfectants in large quantities in school settings may lead to increased adverse respiratory and dermal issues for both the custodial or other staff performing the spraying as well as student and staff occupants of the building (DPH, 2020).*

## **HEALTH**

- Schools will work with local health officials and/or school nurses to develop and institute procedures for individuals who are ill or are suspected to have been in contact with someone who is affected by COVID-19.
- All non-essential uniform items that cannot be washed daily such as ties, blazers, etc. will not be required.

## **ATTENDANCE**

Schools that have to transition into a remote learning environment, regardless of how long the period of time, are expected to track attendance *daily* to the degree that their school management system allows. Monitoring attendance requires tracking and reporting each

student's time both in the school and during engagement in remote learning. The following are guidelines to consider when creating school protocols.

Each school's remote learning plan during yellow and red phase must include the school's attendance requirements, including how the school will document participation in learning opportunities. Schools have options for how to record attendance daily and should strive for a consistent policy for determining attendance across all classrooms and grades in the school. Attendance may require a three-tier approach to account for the differences in instruction: in-person instruction, synchronous remote learning, and asynchronous remote learning. In a yellow phase or blended model, a combination of all three may have to be considered.

### **Attendance During In-Person Instruction**

Attendance related to in-school instruction should be taken in the same manner as it normally is when students are in school. For students who choose to participate through live streaming, attendance will be monitored as though they were in the classroom.

### **Attendance During Remote Synchronous Instruction**

This method replicates the current in-school method of taking daily attendance. In a remote synchronous learning environment, students who are **logged in** at the teacher's scheduled official class time are marked *remote synchronous present for that day (RSP)*, and students who are not logged in at the teacher's scheduled official class time are marked *remote synchronous absent for that day (RSA)*. Some online school management systems may not allow you to make these changes in attendance. In that case, a comment can be made to indicate the absence occurred during a remote synchronous class.

Teachers will take and post attendance in the school's management platform for attendance as if the students were physically present in the classroom.

Just as with traditional in-school attendance, official attendance will be taken at a certain time determined by the school's policy for each grade level. If the student is not participating remotely, the student would be marked absent for the day.

### **Attendance During Remote Asynchronous Instruction or Hybrid Blended Model**

In developing remote asynchronous plans, schools should consider evidence of participation (or lack thereof) to measure attendance with consistent expectations communicated to the students. Evidence of participation may include, but is not limited to:

- Daily logins with the teacher
- Daily interactions with the teacher to acknowledge attendance
  - i.e.: messages, emails, text messages, telephone calls, video chats, etc.
- Assignment completion

These methods allow schools the flexibility to determine daily attendance through an approved plan for providing high-quality instructional practices with *daily engagement measures*. Attendance can be determined through asynchronous instructional methods OR through a combination of asynchronous and synchronous instruction together.

For students who typically attend school on campus but may periodically generate daily attendance via a remote asynchronous instructional method due to extended medical absence, quarantine or accommodations that allow for extended remote asynchronous learning, should be coded for remote based on their schedule.

For students who opt to learn from home in a streamed classroom, daily attendance will be taken as if in class. Students should not have the option of choosing daily if learning will be streamed or in-person. Opting to stream a school day should be planned either for a full term marking period or mid-term period so not to disrupt the learning environment in the class and for the student.

### **Measuring Daily Attendance in an Asynchronous Schedule:**

A typical default for local school/student management systems is to assume that students are in attendance. Absences are entered into the system based on occurrence.

Student engagement with instruction or other instructional avenues and/or any daily contact by the teacher with a student focused on supporting or monitoring student academic progress, as defined by the approved asynchronous instructional plan, will establish daily attendance. *A student will be considered absent if the student does not have documented engagement with the unit and/or daily contact with the teacher, and/or documentation of completion/turn in of daily assignments.*

A teacher or school staff member will input the student's daily attendance into the student management system for the a/synchronous method, based on the student's daily engagement with the teacher or other instructional avenue and/or the daily contact with the teacher, by marking the student **remote synchronous or asynchronous present or absent** on that day.

## **EXCUSED ABSENCES:**

In a remote learning environment, certain considerations must be taken into account to determine absences. Factors to consider include but are not limited to:

- Temporary internet outage for individual students or households;
- Unexpected technical difficulties for individual students such as password resets, software upgrading, or Wi-Fi connectivity issues during a teacher-led synchronous lesson;
- Student absence during COVID-19 until alternative arrangements can be made;
- Additional flexibilities to support students and families.

## **Medically Excused Absence:**

A school policy for a medical reason during this pandemic may be:

*“A medically excused absence occurs anytime a student is out of school due to illness or medical visit. Medical excuses will be accepted in the form of doctor’s note within five school days of the absence or parent call-in on the day of the absence. A student may have up to 10 medically excused absences without a doctor’s note, but with a parent call-in. Medical excused absences will be accepted through this process for students participating both in-person and remotely. This policy will be extended beyond 10 days if the student or someone in the student’s family is in quarantine due to COVID-19 or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.”*

Schools must ensure that attendance policies, as much as practicable, do not penalize staff or students who may contract COVID-19.

## **ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY**

More so now than ever, the need for building community and safe, trusting and caring relationships is critical. Students who have been isolated due to constraints resulting from social distancing and quarantine situations have produced increased cases of anxiety, stress, and depression or detachment from activities. Increasingly, students are refusing to engage in school work due to a lack of social and emotional connections. Our schools must make every effort to counterbalance these harmful effects by building community, fellowship, and opportunities to make personal connections in all learning environments, whether in-person or remote.

Teachers can begin by establishing common attitudes, interests, expectations and goals for the class that value the voice of every student. Every student must feel that he/she can contribute positively and bring valuable input and contributions to the class.

There are many ways teachers build community in their individual classes or classrooms. Some methods include but are limited to the following:

- Arriving early or staying late to speak with students during class meetings;
- Playing music before class starts;
- Engaging students in conversations before instruction begins that ask how they doing, what their days are like, what is going well and what can improve, and other questions that allow them to express how they are feeling or managing the remote setting.
- Giving students an opportunity to share personally through 'introduce yourself' discussion board posts, 'getting to know you' activities, or starting class with an open question.

Adversity and stress directly correlate with brain development. Creating communities that establish a foundation for supporting healthy, whole-child development is essential to our mission as Catholic schools. Creating opportunities for students to be seen and heard, to share their thoughts and ideas especially during synchronous class meetings promotes the social emotional development of students and recognizes them as precious children of God.

This is a time that calls for healing and a conversion of mind and heart. Building community and trusting relationships is paramount to teaching standards or covering content in a curriculum. ***Our schools remain committed to building community whether remotely or in-person. Building community reinforces we are one family united in Christ.*** Our schools nurture a culture of inclusiveness and justice, mindful that students may return to school in need of healing in mind and heart.

Whether the school year begins in-person, remotely, or a combination of both, the priority for teachers must be to first build community - connections and trusting relationships with their students. Administrators must do all they can to support teachers in this effort and find ways, in this time of social distancing, to love creatively and hope boundlessly. Students must know they are loved unconditionally. Learning will happen. However, entering this school year seeking first to heal and build relationships will be the first step to minimizing the effects of this time of pandemic crisis in our schools and in our world.

Pope Francis reminds us: *"Joy. Tenderness. Hope. Rage against hatred and injustice. Delight in kindness and goodness. Confidence that 'all will be well,' because God's love will triumph in the end."*

## Appendix A



### **The Importance of Reopening America's Schools this Fall** **Updated July 23, 2020**

*As families and policymakers make decisions about their children returning to school, it is important to consider the full spectrum of benefits and risks of both in-person and virtual learning options. Parents are understandably concerned about the safety of their children at school in the wake of COVID-19. The best available evidence indicates if children become infected, they are far less likely to suffer severe symptoms.[1],[2],[3] Death rates among school-aged children are much lower than among adults. At the same time, the harms attributed to closed schools on the social, emotional, and behavioral health, economic well-being, and academic achievement of children, in both the short- and long-term, are well-known and significant. Further, the lack of in-person educational options disproportionately harms low-income and minority children and those living with disabilities. These students are far less likely to have access to private instruction and care and far more likely to rely on key school-supported resources like food programs, special education services, counseling, and after-school programs to meet basic developmental needs.[4]*

*Aside from a child's home, no other setting has more influence on a child's health and well-being than their school. The in-person school environment does the following:*

- *provides educational instruction;*
- *supports the development of social and emotional skills;*
- *creates a safe environment for learning;*
- *addresses nutritional needs; and*
- *facilitates physical activity.*
- *This paper discusses each of these critical functions, following a brief summary of current studies regarding COVID-19 and children.*

#### **COVID-19 and Children**

*The best available evidence indicates that COVID-19 poses relatively low risks to school-aged children. Children appear to be at lower risk for contracting COVID-19 compared to adults. To put this in perspective, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as of July 17, 2020, the United States reported that children and adolescents under 18 years old account for under 7 percent of COVID-19 cases and less than 0.1 percent of COVID-19-related deaths.[5] Although relatively rare, flu-related deaths in children occur every year. From 2004-2005 to 2018-2019, flu-related deaths in children reported to CDC during regular flu seasons ranged from 37 to 187 deaths. During the H1N1 pandemic (April 15, 2009 to October 2, 2010), 358 pediatric deaths were reported to CDC. So far in this pandemic, deaths of children are less than in each of the last five flu seasons, with only 64.† Additionally, some children with certain underlying medical conditions, however, are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19.\**



Scientific studies suggest that COVID-19 transmission among children in schools may be low. International studies that have assessed how readily COVID-19 spreads in schools also reveal low rates of transmission when community transmission is low. Based on current data, the rate of infection among younger school children, and from students to teachers, has been low, especially if proper precautions are followed. There have also been few reports of children being the primary source of COVID-19 transmission among family members.[6],[7],[8] This is consistent with data from both virus and antibody testing, suggesting that children are not the primary drivers of COVID-19 spread in schools or in the community.[9],[10],[11] No studies are conclusive, but the available evidence provides reason to believe that in-person schooling is in the best interest of students, particularly in the context of appropriate mitigation measures similar to those implemented at essential workplaces.

### **Educational Instruction**

Extended school closure is harmful to children. It can lead to severe learning loss, and the need for in-person instruction is particularly important for students with heightened behavioral needs.[12],[13] Following the wave of school closures in March 2020 due to COVID-19, academic learning slowed for most children and stopped for some. A survey of 477 school districts by the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education found that, "far too many schools are leaving learning to chance." [13] Just one in three school districts expected teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress for all students, and wealthy school districts were twice as likely to have such expectations compared to low-income districts.[13]

We also know that, for many students, long breaks from in-person education are harmful to student learning. For example, the effects of summer breaks from in-person schooling on academic progress, known as "summer slide," are also well-documented in the literature. According to the Northwest Evaluation Association, in the summer following third grade, students lose nearly 20 percent of their school-year gains in reading and 27 percent of their school-year gains in math.[14] By the summer after seventh grade, students lose on average 39 percent of their school-year gains in reading and 50 percent of their school-year gains in math.[14] This indicates that learning losses are large and become even more severe as a student progresses through school. The prospect of losing several months of schooling, compared to the few weeks of summer vacation, due to school closure likely only makes the learning loss even more severe.

Disparities in educational outcomes caused by school closures are a particular concern for low-income and minority students and students with disabilities. Many low-income families do not have the capacity to facilitate distance learning (e.g. limited or no computer access, limited or no internet access), and may have to rely on school-based services that support their child's academic success. A study by researchers at Brown and Harvard Universities assessed how 800,000 students used Zearn, an online math program, both before and after schools closed in March 2020.[15] Data showed that through late April, student progress in math decreased by about half, with the negative impact more pronounced in low-income zip codes.[15] Persistent achievement gaps that already existed before COVID-19, such as disparities across income levels and races, can worsen and cause serious, hard-to-repair damage to children's education outcomes.[15],[16] Finally, remote learning makes absorbing information more difficult for students with disabilities, developmental delays, or other cognitive disabilities. In particular, students who are deaf, hard of hearing, have low vision, are blind, or have



other learning disorders (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)) and other physical and mental disabilities have had significant difficulties with remote learning.[17]

### **Social and Emotional Skill Development**

Schools play a critical role in supporting the whole child, not just their academic achievement. In addition to a structure for learning, schools provide a stable and secure environment for developing social skills and peer relationships. Social interaction at school among children in grades PK-12 is particularly important for the development of language, communication, social, emotional, and interpersonal skills.[18]

Extended school closures are harmful to children's development of social and emotional skills. Important social interactions that facilitate the development of critical social and emotional skills are greatly curtailed or limited when students are not physically in school. In an in-person school environment, children more easily learn how to develop and maintain friendships, how to behave in groups, and how to interact and form relationships with people outside of their family. In school, students are also able to access support systems needed to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate others' perspectives, and make responsible decisions. This helps reinforce children's feelings of school connectedness, or their belief that teachers and other adults at school care about them and their well-being. Such routine in-person contacts provide opportunities to facilitate social-emotional development that are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate through distance learning.[18],[19],[20]

Additionally, extended closures can be harmful to children's mental health and can increase the likelihood that children engage in unhealthy behaviors. An environment where students feel safe and connected, such as a school, is associated with lower levels of depression, thoughts about suicide, social anxiety, and sexual activity, as well as higher levels of self-esteem and more adaptive use of free time [19],[20] A longitudinal study of 476 adolescents over 3 years starting in the 6th grade found school connectedness to be especially protective for those who had lower connectedness in other areas of their lives, such as home, and to reduce their likelihood of substance use.[20]

Further, a review of studies conducted on pandemics found a strong association between length of quarantine and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, avoidance behavior, and anger. Another review published this year found that post-traumatic stress scores of children and parents in quarantine were four times higher than those not quarantined.[21],[22]

In-person schooling provides children with access to a variety of mental health and social services, including speech language therapy, and physical or occupational therapy to help the physical, psychological, and academic well-being of the child.[23], [24],[25],[26] Further, school counselors are trained in the mental health needs of children and youth and can recognize signs of trauma that primary caregivers are less able to see because they themselves are experiencing the same family stresses. School counselors can then coordinate with teachers to implement interventions to offer children a reassuring environment for regaining the sense of order, security, and normalcy.

Without in-person schooling, many children can lose access to these important services. For example, we know that, even outside the context of school closures, children often do not receive the mental

health treatment they need. Among children ages 9-17, it is estimated that 21 percent, or more than 14 million children, experience some type of mental health condition.[27] Yet only 16 percent of those with a condition receive any treatment.[23] Of those, 70-80 percent received such care in a school setting.[23] School closures can be particularly damaging for the 7.4 million American children suffering from a serious emotional disturbance. For those individuals who have a diagnosable mental, behavioral or emotional condition that substantially interferes with or limits their social functioning, schools play an integral role in linking them to care and necessary support services.

For children with intellectual or physical disabilities, nearly all therapies and services are received through schools. These vital services are difficult to provide through distance learning models. As a result, more children with disabilities have received few to no services while schools have been closed.

### **Safety**

Extended school closures deprive children who live in unsafe homes and neighborhoods of an important layer of protection from neglect as well as physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment and abuse. A 2018 Department of Health and Human Services report found that teachers and other educational staff were responsible for more than one-fifth of all reported child abuse cases—more than any other category of reporter.[28] During the COVID-19 school closures, however, there has been a sharp decline in reports of suspected maltreatment, but tragically a notable increase in evidence of abuse when children are seen for services. For example, the Washington, D.C. Child and Family Services Agency recorded a 62 percent decrease in child abuse reporting calls between mid-March and April 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019, but saw more severe presentation of child abuse cases in emergency rooms.[29] Children who live in a home or neighborhood where neglect, violence, or abuse occur, but who are not physically in school, are deprived of access to trained school professionals who can readily identify the signs of trauma and provide needed support and guidance.[30],[31],[32],[33],[34]

### **Nutrition**

Extended school closures can be harmful to the nutritional health of children. Schools are essential to meeting the nutritional needs of children with many consuming up to half their daily calories at school. Nationwide more than 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program and nearly 15 million participate in the School Breakfast Program.[35],[36] For children from low-income families, school meals are an especially critical source of affordable, healthy foods. While schools have implemented strategies to continue meal services throughout periods of school closures, it is difficult to maintain this type of school nutrition program over the long-term. This is a particularly severe problem for the estimated 11 million food-insecure children, living in the United States.

### **Physical Activity**

When schools are closed, children lose access to important opportunities for physical activity. Many children may not be sufficiently physically active outside of the context of in-school physical education (PE) and other school-based activities. Beyond PE, with schools closed, children may not have sufficient opportunities to participate in organized and safe physical activity. They also lose access to other school-based physical activities, including recess, classroom engagements, and after school programs.

*The loss of opportunities for physical activity from school closures, especially when coupled with potentially diminished nutrition, can be particularly harmful to children. Physical inactivity and poor nutrition among children are major risk factors for childhood obesity and other chronic health conditions. Over 75 percent of children and adolescents in the United States do not meet the daily physical activity level recommendations (60 minutes or more), and nearly half exceed 2 hours per day in sedentary behavior. Current models estimate that childhood obesity rate may increase by 2.4 percent if school closures continue to December 2020.[37],[38],[39]*

## **Conclusion**

*Schools are an important part of the infrastructure of our communities, as they provide safe, supportive learning environments for students, employ teachers and other staff, and enable parents, guardians, and caregivers to work. Schools also provide critical services that help meet the needs of children and families, especially those who are disadvantaged, through supporting the development of social and emotional skills, creating a safe environment for learning, identifying and addressing neglect and abuse, fulfilling nutritional needs, and facilitating physical activity. School closure disrupts the delivery of in-person instruction and critical services to children and families, which has negative individual and societal ramifications. The best available evidence from countries that have opened schools indicates that COVID-19 poses low risks to school-aged children, at least in areas with low community transmission, and suggests that children are unlikely to be major drivers of the spread of the virus. Reopening schools creates opportunity to invest in the education, well-being, and future of one of America's greatest assets—our children—while taking every precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and all their families.*

*\*Some children have developed multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C) after exposure to SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19). (<https://www.cdc.gov/mis-c/cases/index.html>) In one targeted surveillance study for MIS-C associated with SARS-CoV-2, however, the majority of children who were hospitalized with COVID-related MIS-C (70 percent) had recovered by the end date of the study period. (Feldstein LR et al.. Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in US Children and Adolescents. *N Engl J Med.* 2020;10.1056/NEJMoa2021680)*

*†CDC COVID Data Tracker. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.*