



WHAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS NEED

Principles and Priorities for State COVID-19 Guidance and Action

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INTRODUCTION

In response to COVID-19, state governments, including state education agencies (SEAs), are being called upon to prioritize issues, make many decisions, and take action. As they do, one key priority should be to listen to their local education agencies (LEAs) about what local leaders and their communities most need this coming year and beyond. Although each SEA should engage with its own LEAs, this document seeks to provide a starting place for those conversations. It identifies, from the school district perspective, four principles for SEAs to embrace and fourteen priorities for them to address during this critical period.

The principles and priorities were culled from interviews with and feedback from the 18 superintendents of the [Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium](#), an invitational network of large, diverse, innovative, and leading school districts dedicated to dramatically improving excellence and equity in public education through collaboration, leadership, and advocacy. Superintendents' input was also cross-walked with a set of recent publications by education leaders, associations, and other entities regarding priorities for reopening schools.

The priorities listed below are just that—the most important areas for SEAs to address at this moment, as identified by leading school district superintendents. To truly address the effects of the pandemic, SEAs will surely need to do more, now and over time. But with so much to consider, SEAs can use this document to sort through all the possibilities and focus on what LEAs need most.

CONTEXT

Every level of the public education system is grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, from navigating this spring's closing of school buildings to planning for how to reopen and recover this summer, during school year 2020-21, and beyond. Some state, districts, and schools are also reassessing long-held assumptions about how to structure the learning experience for students and adults with the goal of reinventing much of it.

Regardless of the particular approach, students and staff will need more support than ever—especially those disproportionately affected by the insidious interaction between the pandemic and preexisting, systemic inequities along lines of race, ethnicity, national origin, socio-economic status, disability, and language. Meanwhile, even with additional federal funds, schools will have to meet those needs in the midst of looming state and local budget cuts.

School districts in particular will be making an array of decisions about how to mitigate these risks and even to take advantage of new opportunities made possible by the crisis. The good news is that there is a lot we know from the [science of learning and development](#) and from [learning systems that connect practice and research](#) about what it takes to address systemic inequities and help each and every child thrive. LEAs can and must meet this moment effectively. Their ability to do so, however, will depend in part on the guidance, resources, discretion, and partnerships they have at their disposal—a good portion of which depends on decisions made at the state level. It is thus essential that SEAs understand what LEAs most need in these unprecedented times.

4 Principles

School districts need their SEAs to be:

Equitable by targeting resources to those who need help the most and addressing systemic barriers

Flexible by adjusting policies and practices as needed and continuously responding to new lessons learned

Inclusive by avoiding top-down decisions and keeping lines of communication open

Aligned by breaking down silos within and across state agencies, including coordination of requests and deadlines

14 Priorities

School districts need their SEAs to address the following priorities:

Continuity of Learning

1. Closing the Digital Divide: SEAs should eliminate inequities in access to high-speed internet, hardware, and software needed by students for online learning and engagement.
2. Guidance on Reopening—School Structures: SEAs should provide comprehensive guidance about how LEAs might approach operating schools in the fall, including various options that LEAs can adopt and/or adapt to their own contexts.
3. Assessments: SEAs should provide (or support LEAs in providing) comprehensive, accurate, and efficient screeners and assessments to understand students' experiences during the crisis, identify their needs across all developmental domains, and inform resource allocation and student-level supports.
4. Instructional Guidance & Resources: SEAs should help LEAs mitigate instructional losses and improve the effectiveness of any continuing remote learning program.

Conditions for Learning

5. Guidance on Reopening—Health & Safety: SEAs should actively coordinate with their public health counterparts in the federal and state governments to ensure LEAs have evidence-based, comprehensive, and clear guidance about the health and safety aspects of reopening schools.
6. Wraparound Supports—Nutrition: SEAs should (and/or work with other state agencies to) establish a clear, systematic nutrition program to ensure students receive meals over the summer and into the school year.
7. Wraparound supports—Mental Health & SEL Support: SEAs should provide a variety of mental health and social emotional resources, especially to LEAs in the most affected communities.

Leadership and Planning

8. Planning Tools & Expert Advice: SEAs should provide high-quality planning tools and expert advice about how LEAs might approach solving common, complex challenges.
9. Communications & Stakeholder Engagement: SEAs should engage stakeholders in key decisions, communicate clearly and accessibly, and support LEAs with high-quality resources that help with their own community engagement and communications.
10. Procurement: SEAs should use their purchasing power to procure in bulk some commonly-needed resources, from technology to face masks, and then distribute to LEAs equitably.

Funding & Policy

11. Additional State Funding: SEAs should identify (and advocate for) additional state funding to support LEAs as they support the increased needs of students and staff.
12. Additional Federal Advocacy: SEAs should advocate with the federal government to provide the funding LEAs will need to reopen, recover, and thrive in SY20-21 and beyond.
13. Flexibility—Federal Funding & Policy: SEAs should be flexible regarding how LEAs use federal funds and thoughtful about how to implement annual assessment and accountability systems.
14. Flexibility—State Funding & Policy: SEAs should reexamine policies that constrain how flexible LEAs can operate and how flexibly they can use state and local funds.

PRINCIPLES FOR SEA GUIDANCE & ACTION

The following principles or themes arose repeatedly in our interviews with district leaders about how SEAs can best support school districts as they reopen schools for SY20-21.

LEAs need their SEAs to be:

EQUITABLE: COVID-19 has caused some new inequities, but more than anything it has revealed and, too often, exacerbated them. District leaders are keenly attuned to how much harder the crisis is hitting their students and families who are already least well-served by our society and our education systems. As SEAs make decisions about new and existing resources, it is critical that they center their decision making on a deep commitment to equity.

FLEXIBLE: There are policies and processes that need to be adjusted as schools reopen. Some are rules that apply to LEAs and others are processes internal to SEAs. Some will be short-term changes, others may be in place for longer, and still others may become part of a “new normal.” After making initial adjustments and allowing LEAs the flexibility to respond to their local contexts, SEAs must maintain a learning mindset because there is still so much we do not know. District leaders need their SEAs to themselves function as learning systems that continually assess, reflect, and adjust. One benefit of this approach is that SEAs and LEAs may discover innovative solutions to unexpected challenges.

INCLUSIVE: Just as districts sometimes assume they know what schools, educators, families, and students really need, SEAs can sometimes assume they know with certainty what LEAs in their state need. Superintendents will need a lot from SEAs moving forward, but they need what is truly helpful and not what is assumed to be. SEAs should therefore listen closely to their districts and other stakeholders.

ALIGNED: More than ever, each SEA should ensure its various departments are coordinating internally to bring coherence to SEA messaging, advice, requirements, and, perhaps most importantly, timelines. With so much more on their plates, LEAs will benefit from the great alignment and coherence that is generated when SEAs break down internal silos. SEAs should similarly seek to align better with other state agencies and partners supporting children and families.

LEA PRIORITIES FOR SEAs

The following are recommendations for what SEAs should prioritize to meet LEAs' needs as they plan for reopening schools and managing SY20-21 during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The 14 priorities are organized around the four categories of CCSSO's "[Restart & Recovery](#)" framework to align with how SEAs across the nation are approaching this unprecedented challenge. There are certainly other items that SEAs will need to attend to, but this list is intended to highlight what LEA leaders need *most* from their SEAs at this time.

Continuity of Learning

1. Closing the Digital Divide: SEAs should take bold action to finally and completely eliminate longstanding inequities in high-speed internet access, hardware, and software. One superintendent asked for a modern, digital version of the Tennessee Valley Authority effort to bring electricity to rural communities. Another suggested SEAs may be able to wield greater purchasing power on behalf of the entire state and thus procure and distribute more access to more students.
2. Guidance on Reopening—School Structures: SEAs should provide comprehensive guidance about how LEAs might approach safely operating schools in the fall, including various options that LEAs can adopt and/or adapt to their own contexts. These may include continued remote learning, staged or staggered reopenings of school buildings, and blended approaches that keep in-person numbers low or accommodate students who cannot safely attend in person.¹ Leaders cautioned against SEAs adopting either "one size fits all" or "choose your own adventure" approaches and requested that any SEA guidance make clear what is required and what is left to local discretion.
3. Assessments: Given the extended distance learning during the current year, the lack of summative assessment data, and the various ways that the crisis is affecting each child's health and development, there is a greater than usual need for comprehensive, accurate, and efficient assessments. These screeners and assessments will provide critical information to LEAs about students' experiences during the crisis and their needs moving forward across all the developmental domains. Some SEAs may be in a position to provide a statewide solution (or at least an option) for addressing this critical challenge. For example, SEAs may renegotiate the scope of work with their summative assessment vendor or make recommendations to LEAs about how to select a combination of high-quality screening tools and assessments to help meet their goals as they design new learning environments, allocate resources, and provide student-level supports.
4. Instructional Guidance & Resources: Mitigating the loss of instruction without relegating our most marginalized students in remedial tracks is one of the greatest challenges facing LEAs. SEAs should prioritize finding ways to assist (e.g., sharing evidence-based practices, providing technical assistance, forming collaborative networks). For those SEAs that issue statewide pacing guides, LEAs would benefit from guidance on how to weave SY19-20 standards into the SY20-21 guides, as well as how to best embed physical, social, and emotional supports in curricula.

Because remote learning will likely continue to play a role in SY20-21, SEAs should also share best practices; offer professional development; provide instructional resources tailored for vulnerable student groups; and even help communicate to families what developmentally appropriate distance learning looks like.

¹ One superintendent estimated that 5-10% of his district's students have high-risk factors and therefore may be unable (or unwilling) to return to school without a vaccine or effective treatments available. A recent [report](#) projected that 18% of teachers and 27% of principals may be considered high-risk solely due to their age.

Conditions for Learning

5. Guidance on Reopening—Health & Safety: SEAs should actively coordinate with their public health counterparts in the federal and state governments to ensure LEAs have evidence-based, comprehensive, age-appropriate, and clear guidance about the health and safety aspects of reopening schools. From knowing *when* to reopen to *how* to reopen safely to *what* to do in response to newly confirmed cases, LEAs need entirely new operational playbooks. In any areas where SEAs do provide guidance, it should be clear what is required by state directive and what remains within local discretion.
6. Wraparound Supports—Nutrition: Even if schools reopen, hunger and food insecurity will continue for many students and their families, especially given the ongoing economic impact of the pandemic and during any additional closures. SEAs should first study how LEA-led food distribution did and did not work during the SY19-20 closure and then identify ways SEAs and/or other state agencies can assist with the resources required to procure, prepare, and distribute meals. Further, the state nutrition program should include clear, systematic information about available resources and controlling parameters.
7. Wraparound supports—Mental Health & Social Emotional Support: More students (and staff) will need more mental health and social emotional supports than ever before. SEAs should consider what resources they can provide, especially to LEAs in the most affected communities. Supports might include, but not be limited to, research-based guidance, increased coordination across state agencies, staffing support for LEAs that will need more on-site capacity than local budgets can support, statewide multilingual hotlines staffed by mental health professionals and counselors, and technical assistance for creating more equitable learning environments aligned with the science of learning and development.

Leadership and Planning

8. Planning Tools & Expert Advice: Although each LEA will need to craft its own plan(s), SEAs should provide high-quality planning tools and expert advice about how LEAs might approach solving common, complex challenges. LEAs are facing an unprecedented planning challenge with diminished capacity and likely fewer resources. SEAs can help this process, especially for LEAs that are less prepared for this type of planning, but they should resist the temptation to create top-down plans. Note that the planning must also include contingency planning for a variety of scenarios including possible additional closures during SY20-21.
9. Communications & Stakeholder Engagement: Like with planning, LEAs will have varying capacity for effectively managing the communications and stakeholder engagement demands of the reopening process and of new models for delivering instruction. SEAs can provide high-quality toolkits and/or share district exemplars for other LEAs to adapt to their own needs (e.g., resources to help LEAs coordinate with partners in the early childhood community regarding transition and other supports). SEAs should also ensure its own communications are clear and accessible to all communities.
10. Procurement: With so many LEAs needing (or even competing with each other) to procure so many similar items—from laptops to masks and other personal protective equipment—SEAs should consider how to use their purchasing power to procure commonly-needed resources in bulk and then distribute to LEAs equitably.

Funding & Policy

11. Additional State Funding: LEAs are facing a “perfect storm” of increasing needs and decreasing resources. Interviewees predicted that the initial CARES Act funding would barely scratch the surface, such as supporting an expanded summer program but with little remaining to assist with SY20-21. One superintendent worried he would be forced to use the CARES funding to reimburse the district for all the meals distribution costs incurred during the current closure, leaving little even for the summer. SEAs should help avoid scenarios like this and should make clear that CARES funding is designed to meet immediate needs. As these are responsibly expended, SEAs can more effectively advocate for additional needed federal investments.

With the expected substantial drop in state and local revenue for FY21, LEAs will have to do even more with even less. SEAs must identify additional existing federal and state funding that can be repurposed to support LEAs, and they should aggressively advocate with governors and state legislatures to prioritize education funding even under these challenging financial circumstances. In the meantime, SEAs can provide guidance and technical assistance to LEAs about how to mitigate the impact of likely cuts, especially for higher-poverty districts that may rely more on state funds.

12. Additional Federal Advocacy: SEAs are well-positioned to advocate with the federal government to provide the funding LEAs will need to reopen, recover, and thrive in SY20-21 and beyond. SEAs should include LEAs in the advocacy process, especially to help identify needs and share concrete examples of why additional funding or policy changes² are necessary. Another area of advocacy identified by one superintendent was with the state’s university system to coordinate on admissions and post-secondary transitions for at least the next two or three cycles.

13. Flexibility—Federal Funding & Policy: SEAs should be as flexible as possible (within legal constraints) with respect to how LEAs use their federal funds, both existing funds and new funding streams arriving in response to the pandemic. For existing funds, SEAs should clarify how LEAs can flexibly use ESSA and other federal funding streams to meet their needs. For new funds, SEAs should resist placing overly restrictive constraints on CARES funding beyond ensuring they are expended on those students and communities with the greatest needs.

Although ESSA’s assessment, accountability, and school improvement provisions were mostly paused for SY19-20, LEA leaders want SEAs to begin thinking about what, if any, flexibility is needed for SY20-21 and perhaps beyond. These systems are critical for understanding the status of learning and making policy and resource decisions to help all groups of students succeed. SEAs and LEAs should work together, in a timely fashion, to maintain them in ways that fit the current reality without creating unintended negative consequences.

14. Flexibility—State Funding & Policy: SEAs should reexamine state policies that constrain LEA flexibility with funding (e.g., carryover policies for state funds) and compliance (e.g., state special education policies that go beyond IDEA’s mandates). LEAs in each state will likely have specific requests, so SEAs should establish a process for gathering LEA input into a policy flexibility agenda. The superintendents interviewed identified many of the same areas, though, most of which related to the following two areas: (I) *human capital policies* such as licensure requirements, reduction-in-force rules, incentives for retention and hiring, teacher-of-record and class-size regulations, and guidance about employees who do not return to reopened schools; and (II) *policies related to time*, such as school calendars, school days, and seat-time requirements for credit accrual and graduation.

² Several superintendents raised the issue of potentially significant litigation costs stemming from lawsuits over IDEA compliance during periods of school closure. This topic is currently under debate in Congress and beyond the scope of this document, but this remains a concern with many district leaders.

CONCLUSION

LEA leaders must also manifest the same four principles as they address their own priorities in preparing their staff, students, and communities for the summer, school year 2020-21, and beyond. They will be better positioned to succeed in that unprecedented challenge with their SEAs supporting, guiding, and acting along the lines outlined above.

ABOUT THE LARGE COUNTYWIDE & SUBURBAN DISTRICT CONSORTIUM

The Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium is an invitational network of large, diverse, innovative, and leading suburban and countywide school districts dedicated to dramatically improving public education through collaboration, leadership, and advocacy. The Consortium envisions a public education system that ensures every student—regardless of background—realizes his or her full potential.

The Consortium currently includes 18 districts that span eleven states from Washington to Florida, represent eight of the largest 25 school districts in the nation, enroll an average of 103,000 students, and educate a total of 1.7 million students. Members' growing and increasingly diverse student bodies reflect communities across America, with 63% students of color and 45% qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunch.

Member districts include: Baltimore County Public Schools (MD), Beaverton School District (OR), Bellevue School District (WA), Boulder Valley School District (CO), Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC), Chesterfield County Public Schools (VA), Cobb County School District (GA), Cumberland County Schools (NC), Fairfax County Public Schools (VA), Fulton County Schools (GA), Greenville County Schools (SC), Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA), Mesa Public Schools (AZ), Montgomery County Public Schools (MD), The School District of Palm Beach County (FL), School District U-46 (IL), Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VA), and Wake County Public School System (NC).

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