

K-12 Education Recovery Taskforce

The Southern Regional Education Board has convened a regional K-12 Education Recovery Taskforce to collaborate on strategies for re-opening schools in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the taskforce include education policymakers, state and district superintendents, principals and teachers from the 16 SREB compact states. The taskforce is proactively anticipating challenges and weighing solutions for states, districts and schools. The taskforce's highest priority is to address students' needs.

Taskforce members are collaboratively exploring and developing action plans related to immediate areas of concern, including academic achievement and the impact of the "learning slide," financial management, the social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff, and the planning and delivery of quality instruction. The taskforce will gather resources from multiple partner organizations and identify research-based solutions to these concerns. These actions, solutions and resources will be collected in a playbook for state education agencies, local school districts and individual schools.

Schools and districts need plans for how to deliver high-quality instruction. Action plans will include strategies for addressing academic achievement, assessing students' learning gaps and identifying accelerated learning interventions. States, districts and schools will be able to use these strategies to allocate teachers to grades and content areas and offer targeted professional learning.

Although the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act can assist states in meeting immediate concerns, states and districts must carefully plan how to use this one-time source of financial assistance. The taskforce will identify potential systemic uses of these funds and provide guidance on how to concentrate their use.

The taskforce will also examine the ongoing impact of the pandemic on the social and emotional well-being of students and staff. Taskforce co-chair James Lane, Virginia State Superintendent of Public Instruction, said: "We must tackle not only how we can provide academic support, but also how can we provide the mental health support and the wraparound supports for students when they come back, to help them recover and bring back that safety net in our schools."

During the first meeting of the taskforce on April 23, 2020, taskforce members divided into three groups to identify critical areas of concern from the perspective of state education agencies, local school districts and individual schools. As described in the synopses below, three key issues emerged:

- Students' health and safety needs,
- Academic and social supports for students and staff, and
- Effective, community-wide communication strategies.

State Education Agencies

The state education agency group included representatives from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland and Oklahoma. Representatives initiated discussions around general areas of concern, including safety measures for staff and students, gaps in learning and how to deploy an assessment strategy that includes diagnostics, opportunities to accelerate learning, logistics related to opening physical plants — including supplying food, cleaning products and learning resources, budget concerns, support for staff to attend to the social and emotional well-being of students, and the effective use of virtual learning tools.

The group had a deeper discussion around equitable access to virtual learning resources and services. This discussion highlighted the need to provide additional support to teachers to effectively plan and deploy virtual learning sessions. The discussion also revealed that some families have reported that their students have experienced more success with virtual learning than traditional

classroom instruction. This spurred a group discussion of how this might impact school choice or allowing students and families to select their preference of instructional delivery models. The group also discussed the limitations of internet access in rural areas. Group members from Alabama shared that local news and radio stations were willing to partner with schools to increase access for families.

The group identified the following issues as immediate concerns for state education agencies:

- Social-emotional support for students, including how to train teachers to support students when schools reopen
- Access to virtual learning and engagement limitations, especially in rural areas
- Procedures for safely opening facilities and strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19
- Support for academic acceleration to address gaps in learning
- School choice and instructional delivery choice
- Funding concerns, especially the impact of the coronavirus on local economies

The group identified academic acceleration as state education agencies' most pressing need, with the need for guidance and procedures for opening facilities as a second priority.

Local Education Agencies (Districts)

In the local education agency group, taskforce members from Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia agreed that their greatest concern is how to address district- and community-specific needs and accelerate student learning while ensuring the safety of students, teachers, staff and families.

Group members stressed that districts' number one priority is to assure parents that their children will be safe. To that end, states and districts will need to work together to create robust communication plans that involve all key shareholders in the community. Although governors' executive orders, the Centers for Disease Control and state health departments may offer health and safety guidelines within which districts can plan to reopen and offer instruction, group members agreed that districts will ultimately be responsible for assessing and addressing student learning needs, targeting inequities in access to resources and adapting quickly to changing conditions.

Group members offered a number of potential strategies for districts to consider:

- Assess whether schools and communities have the personnel, funding and material resources (e.g., personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, classroom space, buses, technology resources) needed to provide quality instruction while meeting CDC, state or local health and safety mandates.
- Design flexible reopening plans that address local variations in access to resources and allow districts to adapt to changing conditions as the coronavirus spreads, slows or reoccurs. Plans might include early or late starts to the school year, staggered schedules, smaller class sizes and a mix of face-to-face and virtual instruction. Districts need examples of practices from other states and districts. Districts should submit plans to state and district departments of health for guidance and approval.
- Consider multiple methods for assessing learning loss in an environment that may remain disrupted or dysfunctional for some time. All communities will need to address the impact different levels of preparation will have on grade level advancement, graduation and readiness for college and careers across schools, districts and states. Group members noted that districts will need to provide teachers with the professional development they need to identify where students are and meet their social-emotional and learning needs.

- Consider offering a range of accelerated learning interventions and social-emotional supports in face-to-face and/or virtual settings, including afterschool programs, extended days and summer or weekend activities. Group members urged states and districts to weigh the benefits of competency-based assessment models versus those based on seat time.
- Prepare to address personnel shortages if teachers or staff with compromised immune systems cannot come back or have to leave the classroom mid-year. Districts and states may need to establish pathways for jobseekers who wish to enter the classroom for the first time. Some states may need to relax school calendar laws and provide funding to support the additional days teachers need to provide accelerated learning. Communications plans need to address the public perception that teachers working from home are not using their contracted days.
- Seek funding from federal, state and local sources to support district health and safety initiatives, food programs, additional staff time for accelerated learning, technology purchases (e.g., internet access, learning management systems, devices, etc.) and other critical needs. Group members particularly highlighted the need to address inequities in access to internet, wifi and digital tools in both urban and rural communities.

Building Level (Schools)

The building level group included representatives from Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

Group discussions began with a focus on the health and safety of students and staff, including a lengthy discussion about the need to sanitize buildings and establish processes for continuous cleaning. A major concern is students and staff with preexisting health issues. How will schools ensure these individuals are not exposed to the coronavirus? Schools must have a plan for communicating with parents, students and the community about how the school is following CDC, state or local guidelines to make school buildings safe.

The group also discussed students' academic achievement. Teachers are especially concerned about content that is not being covered or learned in the absence of in-person instruction. Several members asked how schools will plan to assess students and determine targeted interventions. The group also expressed concern about meeting learning goals for students with special needs. Are schools meeting the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Act? Members also expressed concern about the financial impacts of COVID-19 and anticipated that economic conditions will have a negative impact on school funding received from the state.

Group members identified the health and well-being of students and staff as the most immediate concern schools will need to address. Schools will need:

- Procedures for assuring students, parents and staff that the school building is safe. Group members recommend that schools follow CDC and state department of health guidelines for cleaning buildings.
- Procedures for implementing social distancing.
- Plans for communicating with parents, students and the community about procedures for addressing the health and well-being of students and staff.