

# ISSUE PAPERS 2021 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES 2020

## Remote Learning and Reopening Schools

**With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing, all public schools in Maryland started the school year learning remotely. Most school systems are providing in-person instruction to small groups of students, and some are moving toward a hybrid model for some students for the remainder of the fall semester. School systems are facing many challenges with effectively teaching most students remotely while at the same time safely reopening schools. Many students are suffering learning loss during remote learning, which is exacerbating the learning gap for struggling students that existed prior to the pandemic. Addressing students' learning loss as soon as possible is critical and will remain a challenge after the pandemic.**

### Background

The abrupt change from in-person instruction to an all-remote learning model in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic had an immediate impact on student access to instruction, student learning, and school resources. Local school systems and schools across the State struggled to provide student instruction using various remote learning models, with significant variation from one school system to the next and with limited success. With the continuation of the pandemic, all of Maryland's 24 local school systems began the 2020-2021 school year with all-remote instruction, although most systems planned to begin some form of in-person instruction later in the fall semester. With the additional time for school systems to plan over the summer, remote instruction in the 2020-2021 school year is intended to be more robust than the instruction that was provided in the spring. Schools across the State are working to address the many challenges of operating successful virtual instruction and navigating the challenges of safely returning to in-person learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), as of October 13, 2020, 19 school systems provided in-person instruction for small groups of students or limited hybrid instruction. Generally, systems opened in-person instruction first to students with disabilities, English learners, elementary students (including prekindergarten and kindergarten), and career and technical education students. Hybrid instruction involves a combination of remote and in-person instruction with typically two days of in-person instruction each week. Most systems plan to open schools for some in-person instruction in the second quarter of the fall semester, *i.e.*, mid-November. Baltimore City announced on November 2 that it will open 44 schools to in-person instruction for the second quarter, including students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and students who are participating in remote instruction less than 20% of the time. Three systems – Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties – do not plan to offer any in-person instruction until the spring semester. As of November 2, 2020, the remaining two systems, Baltimore and Charles counties, had not yet begun any in-person instruction.

Baltimore County delayed the reopening of four special education centers planned for early November and has not announced a new timeline. Charles County plans to move to in-person instruction for small groups of students beginning November 9.

Several systems and schools have had to return to all-virtual instruction after reopening for in-person instruction due to increasing COVID-19 positivity and case rates. Dorchester County began in-person instruction for a small number of students on September 15 and began hybrid instruction for kindergarten, grade 6, and grade 9 students on October 13. However, Dorchester County announced it was returning to all virtual instruction after its county COVID-19 positivity rate increased from 2.5% on October 10, 2020, to 6.1% on October 21, 2020, which is above the 5% rate metric set by MSDE and the Maryland Department of Health (MDH). The MSDE/MDH guidance for reopening schools is discussed further below.

## State and Local Recovery Plans

In June 2020, MSDE released *Maryland Together: Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education* (State Recovery Plan). The plan was designed to aid local school systems in developing and implementing their own plans for reopening schools in the fall and, ultimately, the students' safe return to in-person instruction. The plan required each local board of education to develop and submit a reopening plan to MSDE by mid-August that addressed multiple requirements for reopening schools, including following health and safety protocols for personnel and students and facility operations, addressing educational inequities, determining student learning loss and preparing for instructional success and recovery, tracking student attendance and remote learning engagement, following federal law for educating students with disabilities, establishing transportation protocols, and ensuring adherence to the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards and State frameworks for instructional content.

Each local recovery plan was developed in collaboration with a broad range of stakeholder groups, including teachers, parents, students, educators, local health experts, and other community members. After initial submission and after feedback from MSDE, each school system's plan was approved by MSDE and posted to the local school system's website.

However, after approving all 24 recovery plans, the State Board of Education, at the State Superintendent's request, adopted a student engagement requirement for local school systems. Each school system providing remote learning must provide an average of 3.5 hours of synchronous (*i.e.*, live) learning across all grades (K-12) for each school day by December 31, 2020. The synchronous learning requirement does not have to be met within each grade but across all grades. Further, a local school system must provide 6 hours of instruction per day, including asynchronous instruction.

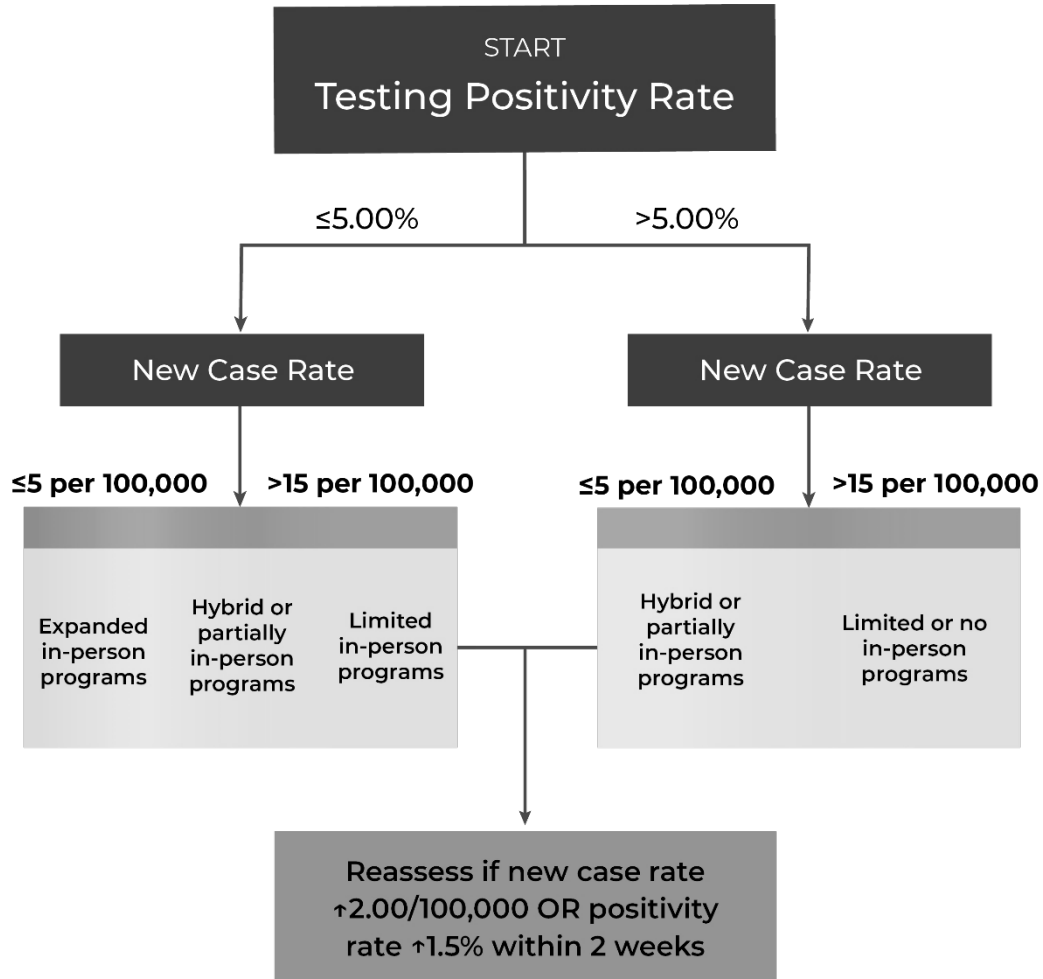
## **Factors for In-person School Reopening Decisions**

The Governor and the State Superintendent have encouraged local school systems to open for in-person instruction if it is safe. Schools are expected to follow applicable guidelines from MDH, local health departments, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). For the past few months and during the development of local recovery plans, local school systems have worked to address many challenges to safely reopen schools, including reopening metrics, safe facility operations, transportation, and school resources.

### **COVID-19 Metrics**

In late August, following calls for specific public health metrics to guide school reopening decisions, the Governor, the Acting Deputy Secretary of Health, and the State Superintendent announced metrics to be used as guidance for reopening schools for in-person instruction. The metrics are based on the local jurisdiction's positive COVID-19 test rate and the number of new cases. As shown in **Exhibit 1**, a COVID-positive test rate at or below 5% and reports of new COVID cases at or below 5 per 100,000 people in the jurisdiction allow for expansion of in-person programs. However, MSDE and MDH have not, to date, provided clear guidance for when a school or system that is open to in-person instruction should be closed, nor has it provided guidance on notifying school staff and students and their families of positive cases. In the absence of State guidance, local school systems are developing their own protocols, in consultation with local health departments and in some cases other public health experts, including access to testing and contact tracing.

## Exhibit 1 In-person School Reopening Guidance



Source: Maryland Department of Health; Maryland State Department of Education

### Safe Facility Operations

Currently, there is no single accepted standard for when or how schools can be reopened safely. Local school systems are working to comply with health and safety guidelines from the federal CDC and the State, including (1) procuring large quantities of costly personal protective equipment (PPE) (masks, hand sanitizers, and face shields) and cleaning and sanitizing supplies; (2) considering school building modifications, *e.g.*, cleaning and disinfectant; heating, ventilation,

and air conditioning systems; air filtration systems; air purifiers; Plexiglas; and plastic sheeting material; and (3) reorganizing school spaces to accommodate social distancing requirements. Addressing these issues requires additional expenditures from already strained budgets, and as a result, local leaders have requested a more centralized process to streamline and standardize procurement and resource allocation.

In order to help states combat COVID-19, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund provided a total of \$207.8 million to MSDE to be used broadly for educational purposes and to coordinate, prepare, and respond to needs related to the coronavirus (*e.g.*, purchase of PPE, education technology, mental health services, school closures, remote learning, *etc.*). MSDE allocated \$187 million to school systems, the SEED School of Maryland, and nonpublic schools with an additional \$10 million being used to provide grants to school systems to cover the costs of reopening schools and the remainder for professional development and a statewide learning management system. School finance officials have stated that the available federal funds are not sufficient to cover their COVID-19-related costs, but a detailed accounting of the remaining costs has not yet been provided.

The switch to remote instruction and plans for reopening schools without the guarantee of a safe working environment is likely to exacerbate an already existing teacher shortage in the State. Many teachers have expressed concerns with the heavy workloads created by teaching in a remote or hybrid learning model or with being required to return to a school building to teach in person during the pandemic.

## **Transportation**

Transportation of students to and from school is a barrier to in-person instruction because it is difficult to maintain social distance on school buses and public transportation, which is used by Baltimore City students. The CDC guidance regarding school buses recommends that each child sit one to a seat and that the rows in which children sit be alternated. For a 77-passenger bus, this would allow for approximately 13 students to be transported. MSDE recommended that schools follow CDC recommendations for school buses, provided suggestions on how to group passengers and alternate transportation arrangements, and recommended steps to take to ensure that buses are kept safe, including cleaning protocols. To reduce the number of students on school buses at the same time, many systems that have opened for in-person instruction have used alternating schedules and encouraged parents and guardians to transport students.

## **School Resources**

In response to the pandemic, local school systems have had to quickly procure computer devices and work to provide broadband connectivity in order to facilitate remote learning. While the COVID-19 pandemic was not anticipated and school systems all over the country and world struggled to shift to remote learning, the lack of robust learning management systems in many

school systems, which provide an integrated platform for multiple software systems used by teachers and administrators, exacerbated the challenge. Schools continue to provide free meals to students and their families during the months of closure, supported by federal funds. However, with schools closed, school systems' food service budgets, which are a self-supporting activity, are losing revenues from full-price meals.

Due to difficulties in engaging the youngest students through remote learning, preliminary student enrollment figures show declining enrollment, particularly at the prekindergarten and kindergarten levels. Homeschooling applications are also up significantly. This decline directly impacts the fiscal 2022 school budgets due to the school funding formulas being based on the prior year enrollment. It is unknown how many students who withdrew from school this year will return to public school next year, which could result in a longer-term enrollment issue for some school systems.

## Addressing Student Learning Loss

Student learning loss is one of the most pressing problems stemming from closed schools and remote learning models. Learning loss at any grade level occurs under the remote virtual learning model due to a student's lack of access to remote instruction, low-quality remote instruction, differing levels of home support, an environment not conducive to learning (lack of a quiet work space, dedicated device, high-speed internet, or minimal parental academic supervision), loss of supports, and social emotional impacts (social isolation, anxiety, economic insecurity, stress, limited physical activities, and loss of important milestones).

The State Superintendent has cited research that estimates that students could lose between 3 to 11 months of learning, depending on the quality of the remote learning. This problem is heightened in populations of students who struggle and often require additional services, including low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. The Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (known as the Kirwan Commission), in its final policy and funding recommendations made prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, proposed significant funding to support struggling learners in the State. Although the State Recovery Plan requires local school systems to identify students' learning loss and develop a plan for addressing it, local school leaders have expressed concern that there is no standard assessment for determining or tracking learning loss across students throughout the State.

The State allocated \$100 million from the CARES Coronavirus Relief Fund to provide targeted tutoring and learning programs that meet certain criteria. Local school systems have used these funds to mitigate learning loss by employing various strategies beginning in summer 2020 and continuing into this school year. These include:

- **Virtual Summer School:** Many systems partnered with local community organizations to provide virtual tutoring services to students. Prince George's County spent \$40,000 of its CARES Act funding to provide free summer school to thousands of students. Many

systems, including Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Harford, and Montgomery counties, provided similar services.

- ***Small In-person Instructional Groups:*** Baltimore City provided 200 students with in-person tutoring during summer 2020.
- ***Student Learning Centers:*** Many systems have provided classroom space for small groups of students to receive in-person assistance while engaging in virtual instruction. These opportunities are offered to prioritized students as determined by the local system, including English language learners, homeless students, students with disabilities, students of school employees, and those with lack of Internet access. Harford County opened the 2020-2021 school year with 1,800 students in 41 of 54 schools attending student learning centers five days per week. Baltimore City opened the school year with 15 schools hosting student learning centers.

Strategies like these and other innovative approaches will likely continue to be needed for several years to address student learning losses during the pandemic and those exacerbated by the pandemic. Of the \$45.7 million Maryland received in the CARES Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund, \$10 million is being allocated by MSDE to implement unique or innovative approaches to engage students, teachers, and school communities to address academic accessibility as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. MSDE announced 29 grant awards to public schools and school systems, nonpublic schools, and public and private higher education institutions in September. According to MSDE, grant recipients presented creative strategies to support disengaged students, students with disabilities, teachers, and families in need. Priority for funding was given to programs that address the needs of at-risk students.

## Regional Virtual Schools

Another approach to remote learning is consortium learning models. Before the pandemic, some states established statewide or regional virtual schools to support full-time remote learning, often for students who live in rural areas and must travel long distances to attend in-person public school. Nine counties on the Eastern Shore (Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne’s, Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico, and Worcester) developed the Eastern Shore Consortium Blended Virtual Program using federal CARES funds. Parents can opt for this program, and students will use a shared (nonlocal school system) distance learning platform with classes taught by teachers within the school system or utilizing certified teachers from outside of the local school system. Three counties in Southern Maryland (Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary’s) formed the Southern Maryland Consortium and are considering a blended virtual program for the second semester.

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