



## **Florida School Boards Association's Recommendations for Re-opening Florida's Public Schools 2020-2021 School Year**

As Florida looks positively toward reaching Phases 2, 3, and 4 of Re-opening, the Florida School Boards Association offers these suggestions as they relate to reopening our state's public school districts. We support Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran's guiding principles in addressing the needs of students and families: compassion and grace. We know that providing a safe learning environment is paramount for our communities in order for them to have the confidence our schools will need for a successful academic year.

***Our first priority and primary concern is the health and safety of our students, employees, and communities.***

FSBA encourages all school districts to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Florida Department of Health guidelines. Parents, families, and staff will rely on these partners to ensure a thorough and effective COVID-19 testing and contact tracing process is in place. School boards are prepared to assist these partners as needed in these efforts. To have positive educational outcomes, we must ensure health and safety of students and staff is at the forefront of all decisions and operational changes.

### Recommendations

1. Expand the scope of the FLDOE Office of Safe Schools to include a health and safety liaison to school districts to serve as the point person on
  - CDC/FL-DOH guidelines for sanitation and evolving standards of care,
  - COVID-19 related illnesses including consideration of protocols for all students, at-risk students, and/or employees or campus guests who have been exposed to and/or contract COVID-19, and
  - Mental health of students and staff.
2. Provide secure and stable supply lines and funding for necessary equipment, PPE, and additional staff that may be necessary to ensure school districts health and safety is provided. Consideration for supply lines and funding must recognize new and evolving requirements for students, families, and staff returning to school sites to prevent exposure and transference of COVID-19.
3. Support legislation that will hold harmless from lawsuits school districts who can demonstrate implementation of significant procedures to show due diligence and attempts to avoid foreseeable harm to students, staff, and community members.



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### ***We must address the mental health needs of our students and staff.***

Districts will need additional skilled professionals and other resources to recognize and address the welfare and mental health of all students and staff. School districts are currently providing meals for

historic numbers of students, unemployment rates in Florida and the nation have reached unprecedented highs in an unprecedented short timeframe, students and staff are experiencing illness and death of loved ones and loss of many other securities. All of these impacts of COVID-19 cause stress on students and staff. Research of stress on children shows lasting negative impacts on learning which will need to be mitigated as soon as is practical.

### Recommendations

1. Grant additional fiscal allocations for needed resources to address increased mental health services for all students, maximizing their readiness to learn. Needed resources include
  - Training for staff,
  - Conducting assessments, and
  - Other needs as identified.
2. Provide additional resources needed to conduct mental health assessments for all students and provide supports to maximize their readiness to learn.
3. Provide necessary resources for school districts to add an additional in-service day to school district employees before the 2020-2021 school year begins. On this additional day, schools will have the time needed to
  - address overcoming the challenges to closing any learning divide that exists,
  - understand new safety and health protocols, and
  - clarify any additional expectations of staff that will be expected to ensure staff and faculty are prepared for a healthy reopening of schools.

### ***Collaboration must occur on the state and local level.***

Any team or coalition created to respond to conditions or processes regarding public education must include constitutionally elected school board members who, by Article IX of Florida's Constitution, are both responsible for and maintain the authority to direct Florida's school districts.

Where it is appropriate and necessary for state parameters to be provided, we value and welcome them. Where it is appropriate and necessary for local decision making to occur, the school board is the appropriate place for those decisions to be made, using recommendations and reliance on the professional staff who have responded so adeptly over the past two months, and health care professionals whose job it is to counsel on such matters.



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### Recommendation

Require the Florida DOE to establish a statewide, cross-functional input team to assist and guide policy decisions that will impact the reopening of Florida's public schools.

- Establish a robust and thorough dialogue by including school board members, school safety and security professionals and a cross section of stakeholders and healthcare experts. Capture this opportunity to provide all members of the education community involvement in innovative problem-solving and flexibility creation for the benefit of families, students, and school districts.

### ***Provide School Boards with maximum flexibility to provide safest and best environments and opportunities for all students.***

Flexibility will be necessary for school districts to continue to meet the demands of local communities, the Florida Board of Education, the legislature, and our state. The 2020-2021 school year will be predictably unpredictable and infused with a series of "next normals". The evolving needs of primary schools may be very different from the evolving needs of middle or high schools as so many things continue to be in flux. Districts will need to respond to unfolding changes with fluidity and unprecedented pliancy.

We recommend each school district develop, in collaboration with appropriate expert partners, a district-specific Reopening and Operational Plan for the 2020-2021 school year. As districts contemplate the components of their plans, we suggest that they should include structures that will allow parents to participate in their child's education with physical classroom and distance options, allowing parents to make continued decisions that are best for their family while balancing the school district's need to provide adequate frameworks and staffing for student learning. Additionally, these plans should include each district's capacity for onsite, offsite, distance, proficiency-based and blended model options and how the needs of all students will be addressed. Any plan locally developed or required by the FLDOE must be approved by the district school board and allow for revisions as needs arrive.

### Recommendations

1. To optimize the effectiveness of district-specific Reopening and Operational Plan, we request consideration and flexibility for waves of enrollment, withdrawals, transfers, blended learning, and other COVID-19 related circumstances.
  - In addition to current rule and waivers established to provide flexibility during times of crisis or natural disaster, consider waivers or establish procedures that will respond to abnormal attendance patterns and/or lower student-teacher ratios, both of which will affect FTE counts and, subsequently, funding.
    - Provide flexibility with state mandates on attendance, proficiency, transportation, class size, and other impacts related to COVID-19.



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- Continue the abeyance of state required assessments for the 2020-2021 school year and allow districts to use progress monitoring to demonstrate learning gains to provide the necessary time for schools and families regain their academic footing. Without this, assessment results may inadvertently capture the effects of a digital divide and other impacts of COVID-19 on student learning and education.
  
- 2. Provide maximum funding flexibility with school district allocations and appropriations which will allow resources to be redirected to district identified priorities and allow school districts the flexibility to use their financial allocations and resources to best meet the academic, physical well-being, and mental health needs of their students.
  - Districts will have continuing challenges that include
    - Sanitization,
    - Physical and mental health services and supports directly related to COVID-19,
    - Changing teacher/student ratios if physical distancing requirements remain in effect or are put in effect at various times throughout the school year,
    - Remediation for struggling students,
    - Narrowing learning gaps, and
    - Providing for IEP and 504 plans in new and evolving ways.
  - Districts will have continued technology needs as
    - Students will continue to rely on technology support for devices and access.
    - Local networks, bandwidth, hardware, and software solutions to meet growing demand on essential curriculum delivery and progress monitoring will need expansion, and
    - Connectivity remains an unsolved problem in many parts of the state.
  - Districts will have increased, unpredictable, and potentially enormous supply needs due to PPE and sanitization equipment and services, all of which must be attainable.

### **Conclusion**

During these last few months, families, school district staff, and communities have made extraordinary efforts and sacrifices on behalf of public school students in a very short period of time, adapting to the immediate needs of students in response to immediate school closures. Florida school board members and FSBA are prepared and stand ready to continue to lead with families through these transitional times.

We challenge our school board members to solve problems innovatively, with new efficacy and an abundance mindset. We challenge them to oppose parochial thinking and create a Florida public education system that is responsive to immediate and changing needs of all students, their families, and the expectations of Florida citizens. School boards recognize this opportunity to create positive and lasting change throughout Florida's public school system, the very fabric upon which our great state relies.



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Public schools impact our communities economically and culturally. Our schools are more than physical spaces, they are centers of learning and development for the next generation of Floridians. Our students are often the focus of many of our communities' cultural, social, and entertainment opportunities as neighbors gather together to cheer on a high school sports team, enjoy a middle school band concert, or enjoy an elementary school art display. Our young people, from their first day in elementary school through high school graduation, participate in hundreds of activities and events throughout their years, helping form them as citizens.

We join with our communities who are eagerly looking to the 2020-2021 school year to return to some semblance of normalcy and Americana. We yearn to watch the graduates of the Class of 2021 walk across their stage with pride while we loudly applaud them, their future, and Florida's future.

\*Original dated May 5, 2020

\*\*Due to the ongoing changing nature of this health pandemic, FSBA acknowledges this document to be dynamic and fluid and thus, may need adjustments as situations and circumstances warrant.