



## Let's Get Real: When Schools Reopen, We Will Not Return to Normal

By Educator Barnes – May 9, 2020

Friday, May 1, Hoosiers across Indiana tuned in for Governor Holcomb's live stream daily update. My husband, sons, and I were glued to the computer screen awaiting the verdict about if he was extending the stay at home order. He did not; however, three counties

including Marion county, which encompasses all of Indianapolis, extended the order past May 1; Holcomb supported those Mayors' decisions.

Then, Holcomb proceeded to roll out the Back on Track Indiana plan. The plan outlines how the state will resume activities over a course of five stages. What is missing from the plan is how schools will reopen. It is stated in stage five of the plan that K-12 school operations will be determined then. That stage begins the first week of July. I'm sure top education officials are not waiting around until the summer to make a plan, but the unknown is turning the gears in a lot of educators' minds. One thing we all know for sure is when we return, we will not return to operations as they were before.

The CDC submitted a plan called "Guidance for Implementing the Opening Up America Again Framework" to the White House. Although it does not seem these recommendations will be rolled out on a national level due to the current administration's view of leaving decisions up to the states, the CDC is an agency looked to for guidance during times like this. Many governors and top education officials will consider the CDC's guidance, but how will these guidelines work in practice?

The CDC plan has three phases. Our current state, at home learning, is phase one. Phase two is reopening with enhanced social distancing measures in place for students in the local geographic area. One aspect state education officials will have to define is what is considered the local demographics area of a school. Some students live in one county, but their parents exercise school choice and send them to a school in another county. Will these students have to unenroll, or will they have to stay home and continue at home learning? How will school leaders manage this if two school models, in-person and at home learning, continuous simultaneously?

Recommendations for both phase two are:

- *Ensure that student and staff groupings are as static as possible by having the same group of children stay with the same staff (all day for young children, and as much as possible for older children).*
- *Restrict mixing between groups*
- *Limit gatherings, events, and extracurricular activities to those that can maintain social distancing, support proper hand hygiene, and restrict attendance of those from higher transmission areas (Phase 2; Note: restricting attendance from those in Phase 1 areas).*
- *Restrict nonessential visitors, volunteers, and activities involving other groups at the same time*

- *Space seating/desks to at least six feet apart.*
- *Close communal use spaces such as dining halls and playgrounds if possible; otherwise stagger use and disinfect in between use.*
- *If a cafeteria or group dining room is typically used, serve meals in classrooms instead. Serve individually plated meals and hold activities in separate classrooms. Stagger arrival and drop-off times or locations, or put in place other protocols to limit direct contact with parents as much as possible.*
- *Create social distance between children on school buses where possible.*

Keeping the same groups of students together all day, not mixing classes, spacing desk six feet apart, having space between children on the bus, and eating in the classroom are all major changes for the way we do life at school. It is not clear how effective this will be. For example, six feet has been the recommended distance in stores and now it is included in the recommendations for spacing out children. When the teacher walks down the aisle between two rows, that six feet is divided in half. This eliminates this enhanced social distancing measure. Do we space students 12 feet apart? That classroom management strategy of using proximity to keep students on task is out the window and so is aggressively monitoring students as they work. The teacher could make laps around the room at a distance, but if the teacher has to stay six feet away, will the teacher be able to see how the students are doing on the work?

This may mean keeping parts of phase one in place. Education officials quickly shifted from using the term e-learning to at home learning since it was clear that everyone could not connect to the internet and complete work. Using devices in the classroom could help teachers monitor the work while students are in class and allow the teacher to keep the appropriate distance. On the other hand, do we want students tethered to devices all day? Of course, those devices would have to be charged.

How would recess work? Could you toss a ball back and forth? Probably not? Would playground equipment be sanitized between classes? Would playground equipment be off limits? What could children do outside? Run races? This is probably an easier problem to solve than not mixing students at the secondary level. Most middle and high students switch classes and have different students in each class. Schools could create cohorts and then the same group of students would have the same schedule. If we did not want student cohorts switching classes, the teachers could be on a cart and switch rooms. Yep, I know a few teachers just closed this piece when they read, "on a cart." That is most teachers' nightmare.

In phase three, social distancing still takes place but it is not as strict. Through all phases sanitization of the school is a high priority. School leaders will have to figure out how to keep up this level of cleanliness. Will more custodians need to be hired?

The CDC's job is to keep the public healthy. Their job is not to worry about education. Once the CDC's recommendations are taken into account, school leaders will have to determine how to assess students to identify learning gaps and how to move students forward academically. We all know, at some point, state standardized testing will make an appearance.

Some teachers are not waiting; they are leaving the profession. Who can blame them? Even if top state education officials created a perfect plan, there is one huge variable in all schools, the children. Have you seen how some elementary students cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze? Let's get real. We have middle school and high school students on that same struggle bus. How many times have teachers monitored a restroom and knew a student exited the restroom too soon to have cleaned his or her hands? What if the teacher did catch that student?

Let's not forget budget concerns. Enrollment is down right now. If my twin sons were entering kindergarten next school year, I would not enroll them until I heard the education plan from the state. I believe this is why enrollment is down. Parents are waiting for more information. In Indiana, the dollars follow the child. If students don't return, districts could see a huge financial cut to their budgets. The biggest portion of school budgets is payroll. Would teachers lose their jobs? What about the classified staff?

What is clear is there are more questions than answers. Schools will eventually reopen, but it won't be the same.