



Reopening Schools in the Fall Amidst COVID-19: A Resource Guide for Rural Districts

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Education in Rural America

According to the Rural School and Community Trust 2018-2019 annual report, over 9.3 million students are educated in rural communities each year in the United States. This number represents one in five children living in this country, which accounts for more students than the nation’s largest 85 school districts combined. With its own set of issues and challenges, to help rural communities’ transition back to school, this guide is a resource compilation that may provide guidance to ensure a healthy, informed, and safe return to schools in the fall and beyond.

While many school reopening plans are geared towards urban communities, framing solutions to problems relevant in cities with coronavirus spikes and large school budgets, it is equally important to address issues that rural communities are facing in regard to reopening. Rural school communities may face exacerbated economic hardship during this pandemic, and solving issues regarding effective in-person reopening, digital access barriers, safe transportation, and the creation of adequate health and safety protocols for these communities are crucial for the return to schools. This resource provides ongoing guidance to address some of these considerations and will be expanded upon as additional information is published and CDC recommendations are updated. The [Rural Community Resource Hub](#) is an additional resource updated regularly with the most relevant information related to COVID-19, education, public health.

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Data on Reopening Plans

States and communities face different challenges, and thus will take varied approaches to address obstacles. Pertaining to school re-openings, it may be helpful to compare what approaches various states have taken before considering what your own school district may want to implement as a solution.

- The latest data on [school district's reopening plans across the U.S.](#) is available via Education Week. This data is frequently updated with the latest information and can be organized by district name, state, enrollment size, and plan, offering the ability to view specific district community plans
- Education Week's op-ed outlines [6 Ways to Bring Students and Staff Back to Schools](#) during COVID-19. All plans include social distancing protocols and screening recommendations, offering pros and cons for each model.
- The74Million has put together interactive maps that show various state-level recommendations related to school reopening addressing the following issues:
 - [meals](#)
 - [bus transportation](#)
 - [class schedules and classroom set-up](#)
 - [symptom checks](#)
 - [face mask requirements](#)
 - [hand washing](#)

Connectivity Issues

One of the most pressing issues facing rural communities is the rural-urban digital divide. [4.6 million students in the U.S.](#) lack access to Broadband internet and rural communities have fewer options for internet providers, often resulting in limited internet service available generally at higher costs, lower quality, and slower speeds than what is offered in urban communities. As remote and hybrid learning will likely be incorporated into the school year in most districts, addressing internet access for students is an important consideration.

- The Center on Rural Innovation released an article outlining [several affordable emerging wireless Broadband technologies](#), including their benefits and drawbacks, as short or long-term solutions to increasing

internet access in rural communities. These solutions include LEO satellite, 5G Mobile Internet, and TV White Space.

- Thought leaders shared their views in a [webinar featuring three superintendents from rural communities](#) in Indiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee. They discussed educational opportunities unique to rural school districts for digital transformations regarding challenges with Broadband access, funding, and professional development for teachers on useful innovations in technology, and why technology accessibility is important. If you don't have an EdWeb account to watch this video, you can register for free.
- The [U.S. Office of Technology Availability](#) is offering grants and federal funding to increase internet access to reach rural communities and expand access to both internet and technology.
- [BroadbandUSA](#) has compiled a list of all private and federal funding opportunities and grant applications by U.S. region.
- Some rural communities are setting up [internet hotspots in local parking lots](#), public areas, and even in cars, though this solution has high demand and is an expensive fix.

Online/Remote Learning Support

Rural communities, especially those with small school staff, have often faced challenges with digital access. The transition to online learning must be accompanied with technological and social-emotional support by school administrations and should be considered when creating and implementing new school plans. As schools resume, universities, many of which are transitioning to online classes, may provide helpful guidance.

- The University of Missouri released a [helpful guide for troubleshooting Zoom](#) which provides an online learning quick guide for students, parents, and teachers. The guide addresses the most common issues and challenges that people face when using Zoom.
- The University of Montana created a [Rural Schools Guide to Support Families and Students](#) to help educators with remote learning and build strong relationships with students and families along the way. The guide highlights creative approaches to establishing regular school routines in an online setting; provides guidance on how to address

family and student mental health needs; and offers strategies teachers can use to check-in with students and families.

Transportation

Another major challenge that affects many rural communities is student reliance on district-provided bus transportation. With longer average commutes and less access to public transportation, school buses have traditionally provided students in rural communities with a safe and reliable ride to school. With school reopening and safety precautions in mind, many districts are worried about the added costs of both providing masks for students and bus drivers and of adding more buses to the schedule to comply with social distancing guidelines. With budgets in mind, the following resources offer suggestions for how to best prioritize district spending on transportation, while abiding by CDC guidelines to keep students and bus drivers safe.

- The National Association for Pupil Transportation has created [roadmaps for how buses may operate](#) while implementing physical social distancing, health screenings, and personal protective equipment that can work with numerous school reopening models.
- [Transporting Students with Disabilities and IEPs](#) also needs to be considered. The Maryland State Department of Education offers multiple suggestions that coincide with various school reopening models to safely transport these students back to school.
- Education Week has created and released numerous guidelines that address specific transportation concerns as follows:
 - [Checklists for bus operations](#) include suggested protocols for various time frames: [‘before boarding the bus’](#), [‘on the bus’](#), and [‘exiting the bus’](#). These protocols are specifically designed to be utilized by bus drivers.
 - [The Guidance for Social Distancing on School Buses](#) provides a one-page summary on safety measures, seating, and contact tracing.
 - [Screening Students for COVID-19: A Downloadable Questionnaire](#) can be utilized by bus drivers and teachers as soon as students enter buses or school spaces.

- [What happens when a student on the bus has failed their screening?](#) Is a useful guide on how to effectively isolate students with possible COVID-19 symptoms while keeping everyone else safe.

Public Health Resources

Pediatricians and public health experts are mixed in their responses on the best ways that schools should reopen. Information is constantly changing, and it is important to keep updated on the science and the policy recommendations as communities cautiously and optimistically move forward with school reopening. Below is a list of recent publications addressing some of these challenging considerations.

- The [American Academy of Pediatrics' Guidance for School Re-Entry](#) claims that the long-term risks to children of remaining in isolation outpaces the health risks associated with reopening schools in the fall.
- The [CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the President's Plan for Opening America Up Again](#) offers suggestions about mask wearing and screening for students and staff as schools reopen. Many links within the document will be helpful in outlining what screening should look like in greater detail.
 - Education Week released an article about [COVID-19 Testing Key to Reopening Schools, Health Officials Tell Senators](#) following guidance from the CDC about mask wearing in schools.
- [All Hands on Deck: Initial Guidance Regarding Reopening School Buildings](#) is a report released by the National Education Association offering advice and action steps that schools can take when reopening in-person. Specifically, page 21 of the report provides guidance on effective creation of health and safety protocols as a district.
- The American School Health Association has released a series of webinars covering a wide range of public health topics that must be considered when re-entering schools. The topics of the videos are as follows:
 - [School Disinfection Guidance in the Face of COVID-19 and Other Pathogens of Concern](#)

- [Latest Guidelines for Schools from CDC Task Force Lead](#)
- [How do we keep students and staff safe at school? Indoor Air Quality - a talk from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [How do we keep students and staff safe at school?](#)
- [Strategies for Recess to Support Student Success](#)
- Data collected during the pandemic shows that [people of color and of lower-income status are adversely affected by COVID-19](#), and these populations must be considered when thinking about reopening schools.
- This [map of coronavirus incidence rate by U.S. county](#) may also be a useful resource when determining whether it is safe to return to schools for in-person learning in the fall.

This piece was written by Sophia MacLean, Research Intern at the Education Redesign Lab of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It was last updated on July 30, 2020. If have additional resources to contribute, please reach out to ruralcommunityresourcehub@gmail.com.