Return to School: Resetting for the New Year

Key Considerations for School Boards

As we prepare to close a school year filled with extraordinary challenges, local boards of education are thinking about the lessons of the past year and the opening of school in the fall. Effective school boards articulate a clear vision and purpose for their district, connect with the community on priority issues, monitor progress toward goals, and maintain productive relationships with their administration and staff. The last year may have exposed weaknesses within the system, gaps that need to be addressed, and opportunities for improvement. The intent of this document is to provide a framework for board discussions. What did we learn? Where do we focus our efforts? How do we monitor progress? How will we evaluate outcomes?

Learn

Prioritize

Monitor

Evaluate

IASB strongly recommends that school districts work with their respective local health departments and stakeholders to ensure that plans align with the most current scientific knowledge, government orders, and community expectations. It is also important that locally developed plans remain flexible enough to allow for changing conditions and guidance from IDPH and ISBE.

The Role of the School Board

The board of education plays a critical role in the development and oversight of plans involving the return to in-person learning and recovery from the global pandemic. The board determines policy and the strategic priorities of the district (the "what"), while the administrative staff implements the plan (the "how"). An important part of an initial conversation within the leadership team involves discussing **key considerations — academic, social and emotional/mental health, fiscal and operational, and governance and policy —** as well as who will make decisions (i.e. board or superintendent), how plans will be implemented, and how progress will be monitored and communicated.

This document provides a suggested timeline for key questions and board activities to guide the strategic thinking and processes as the board develops, implements, and monitors a plan for return to school in the fall.

LEARN (May)

The board should consider what information and data it needs to inform planning and decision-making.

Academic Considerations

- What student data does the board need to inform its planning? What is the breakdown by learner characteristics?
  - Number of remote, hybrid, and in-person students and staff in 2020-2021.
  - Number of students currently receiving support services.
  - Current performance levels of students, including how the performance of in-person learners compares to those who were engaged in remote/hybrid.
  - Attendance, discipline, and counseling referrals, and special education referrals.
  - Assessment results.
  - Failure and projected retention rates for 2020-2021.
- What is the latest health guidance regarding in-person learning and remote options for students?
- Who else needs to be engaged in the planning process, and when?
- How will we apply an equity lens to our conversations and decisions?

Social and Emotional/Mental Health Considerations

- What student data does the board need to inform its planning? What is the breakdown by learner characteristics?
  - Attendance, discipline, and counseling referrals, and special education referrals.
  - Referrals for mental health services
- What can we learn from school climate survey data?
- What can we learn regarding the social and emotional status of our staff and administration?

Fiscal and Operational Considerations

- What information does the board need regarding school facilities, such as enhancements that have been completed or will be required to minimize the risk of infection, improve air quality, etc.?
- What sources of funding are available to support recovery and return to in person? (i.e. ESSER3/American Rescue Plan funding) What is the timeline for receipt and distribution of these funds?
- What is the current projected year-end budget (vs. actual) for the operating funds?
- What progress has the district made in terms of internet connectivity and access to technology within the district and in the community? Has the district addressed equity issues related to technology?

Governance and Policy Considerations

- Review the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school calendars to determine whether contingencies or revisions are required to allow for extended learning opportunities for students. Note: Changes to approved calendars and changes to the work day and work year have collective bargaining implications; consult local counsel before proceeding.
- Review current policies and procedures related to retention at grade level. Are modifications needed to keep students on track, with supports?
- Review current policies and procedures related to prerequisites required for subject-level advancement. Are modifications needed to keep students on track, with supports?
- What board policies were modified during the pandemic? Are these modifications still necessary?
- How can the board model effective governance and board learning for all community stakeholders?

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KEY ACTIONS

- Board establishes timeline for approval of the district's plan for return to school
- Board reaches consensus on areas needing more information and opportunities for further learning
- Board establishes timeline for consideration and changes to policies and procedures necessary to implement the plan

PRIORITIZE (May-August)

The board uses data and lessons learned to guide planning and to establish key priorities that will be monitored and evaluated.

Academic Considerations
- What did we learn, and where should we focus?
- What aspects of the educational program will continue?
- What are the highest-priority gaps and plans for closing gaps? What is the desired future state?
- What are the research-based best practices recommended by the administration to address learning loss? (see P-20 Council guidance)
- What elements of the plan are short term versus intermediate and longer term?
- What equity issues must we address?

Social and Emotional/Mental Health Considerations
- What did we learn, and where should we focus?
- What gaps exist between the current state and the desired future state?
- What equity issues must we address?
- How does prioritizing social and emotional well-being impact other issues? What do we stop doing?
- What is the plan for onboarding new students and staff?

Fiscal and Operational Considerations
- What elements of the plan are sustainable and can extend beyond the period in which additional funding is available?
- What are the sources of funding that will support the plan? How will those funds be distributed? How do we ensure equity?
- What factors influenced the critical budget assumptions used for the current fiscal year's budget as well as the tentative budget for next year?
- How will decisions that impact local revenue impact the budget (i.e. lunch prices, registration fees, etc.)?
- What aspects of the transportation, food services, and health programs will remain in place and for how long?

Governance and Policy Considerations
- Are any amendments to the current budget required?
- Does the board need to review modifications that were made to procurement procedures for PPE and related equipment and supplies necessary to protect the health and welfare of students, staff, and the public? Consult with legal counsel before suspending any procurement policies.
- What are the highest-priority gaps and strategic goals that the board will monitor and evaluate?
- What is the current public health guidance and how will it influence the plan?
- Are changes to registration fees and school supply lists required to ensure consideration of the economic circumstances of the community?
- Has the board effectively communicated its priorities to the community?
- How can the board balance the commitment to new priorities and remain adaptable to changing conditions?

KEY ACTIONS
- Review registration and course fees
- Board approval of the gaps to be closed as part of the district's plan; approve changes to the district's strategic priorities.
- Board approval of the plan and the timeline for reporting progress to the board and stakeholders.
- Board approval of any policy and procedural changes necessary to support the plan. For example,
  - Review student attendance policies to ensure flexibility and consider the appropriateness of removing punitive measures for absences related to COVID-19.
  - Review facility use policies, including use for non-educational purposes and cancellation policies.
- Review guidance and directives from state and local health agencies to identify triggers for school building openings, closures, and to inform modification of practices such as allowing visitors and/or public access to buildings. Note that the health department has the legal authority to close school buildings.
- Review how federal funding (ESSER2 and ESSER3) and other state or federal grants will be allocated to support the plan and to ensure equity. Ensure that a minimum of 20% of ESSER3 funds will be allocated to address issues of learning loss.

MONITOR (August-May)

The board develops a cadence of accountability to ensure the plan is implemented, that progress is being made, and that it is communicated to stakeholders.

Academic Considerations
- Once our priorities are reset, how do we know we are making progress?
- What data do we review on a regular basis and does it include our most vulnerable populations?
- What checkpoints do we need to establish to allow the board to monitor progress?
- What diagnostic assessments will be given or have been given to students returning to school to determine learning loss, to inform modifications to curriculum standards and expectations, and to identify support services that may be required?

Social and Emotional/Mental Health Considerations
- What do we need to know about our students and staff that will inform our planning and decision-making? How will this data be collected?
- How will we know our efforts are making a difference for our students?
- What diagnostic assessments will be given to students returning to school to determine social and emotional and mental health needs and to identify support services that may be required?
- What social and emotional considerations should be made for students who withdraw and reenter throughout the year?

Fiscal and Operational Considerations
- Is the plan being implemented within established budget parameters? How will the board know?
- Are designated state/federal funds being accessed and used to support the plan? How will the board know?
- How will the board know that all buildings have been inspected to determine readiness for re-entry?
- How will the board know that safety protocols and prevention measures are implemented and monitored by the staff?

Governance and Policy Considerations
- How and when will data be reported to the board? Establish clear checkpoints for the board to review progress (i.e. quarterly)
- Are constituents, stakeholders, and the media aware of the district's progress?

| Learn |
| Prioritize |
| Monitor |
| Evaluate |

KEY ACTIONS
- Board review of health life safety inspections from local entities (Regional Offices of Education, local health departments, etc.)
- Board review of monthly financial reports to ensure maximization of ESSER resources
- Board review of academic progress reports and efforts to mitigate learning loss
- Board review of social and emotional progress reports
- Board approval of any modifications to strategic priorities or metrics to be used to evaluate the plan.
- Board establishes expectations for a final report of progress made.

EVALUATE (May-June)

The board assesses whether goals were met before repeating the cycle. The board communicates progress and what lies ahead to stakeholders.

Key Considerations

- What were our intended outcomes?
- What progress did we make toward those outcomes?
- Did we reach our intended goal and how do we know?
- What did we learn throughout this past year and how does it impact our planning for next year?
- What needs to change as we look forward and set new goals?

Governance and Policy Considerations

- Should the board adapt its goals for the coming year?
- How can the board engage the community to more effectively move forward?
- How can the board model effective governance and positive relationships so that all stakeholders may succeed?

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KEY ACTIONS

- Board review of academic and social and emotional learning progress.
- Board review of district financial status
- Board review of district operations in support of student learning
- Board discussion of next steps in planning for year two.