A parent perspective on school reopening

Ensuring Every Day and Every Child Counts

A parent perspective on school reopening
To our state’s teachers and education leaders:

As parents, we want to ensure the 2020-21 school year offers a rigorous and a high-quality education for our children. We’re greatly concerned about our students falling behind academically due to the “COVID slide,” and we’re committed to do our part to support and facilitate learning – whether in the classroom or at home through continued remote learning.

Above all else, we want this quality education to be delivered safely, prioritizing the health of our children at all times. We know that COVID-19 disproportionately impacts communities of color\(^1\) – communities that many of us represent. This fact heightens our fears and concerns when it comes to the prospect of sending our children back to school this fall.

We want to ensure our school district leaders and state officials understand these fears and take them into account when planning for next school year. But we also want to offer solutions and guidance, from a parent perspective, to help ensure the school year is successful – both in keeping our children healthy and ensuring significant academic growth.

We, the undersigned public school parents, represent students and families from Indianapolis, but we believe our thoughts and ideas will resonate with parents across our state. These recommendations were driven by our experiences overseeing home learning after the COVID crisis hit. While they are mostly intended for the elementary school setting, some of these ideas may also benefit middle and high school students.

We look forward to working in partnership with the tremendous educators and district leaders across our communities. To all the teachers – the role you play in the lives of our children is so critical, and we appreciate your tireless work and dedication during this incredibly challenging time. You are true miracle workers, and we believe the post-COVID-19 era of schooling offers a unique opportunity to further strengthen the relationship between educators and parents. We need each other more than ever. And more importantly, our children are counting on us to come together to ensure a productive school year.

We’re in this together, and we hope the ideas and recommendations from parents in this document can be helpful in setting the stage for unprecedented collaboration between families, teachers and education leaders.

Reaven Allen
John Cooper
Lucia Cuautle
Melissa Damm
Ana Delgado
Denise Ford
Ana Hernandez
Sherry Holmes
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DeVetrica Quinn
Sashah Robertson
Earl Scott
Shawanda Tyson
Donjarica Walton

\(^1\)http://www.indianapolisrecorder.com/covid-19/article_75bd938a-7f52-11ea-9895-7b40ad9c831a.html
1. Ensuring a safe and healthy school environment

When we as parents put our children on a bus, or kiss them goodbye in the drop-off line, we’re putting their safety and health in the hands of teachers and principals every day. This separation from our children has always been worrisome and nerve-racking. One can only imagine the level of fear that comes in the era of COVID-19, when school could mean exposure to a virus that could make our kids severely sick or take their lives in rare cases.

We’re parents and not health care professionals. Our request for state and school leaders is to follow the science when considering whether to open schools and creating protocols to mitigate the risks of spreading COVID-19 in classrooms.

1. Don’t rush to open schools unless and until the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) phase-specific thresholds for school reopening are met.²
2. When schools do reopen, follow CDC guidance on measures to reduce potential spread.
   ✓ From social distancing to masks to health screenings to the increased cleaning of buildings, we want protocols backed by science to be strictly followed by schools.
   ✓ We want to ensure there are clear communications protocols in place to quickly alert families if a student or staff person tests positive for COVID-19.
     ○ We believe privacy laws can still be adhered to while at the same time ensuring parents know if their child has been potentially exposed to the virus.
3. To help ensure schools follow protocols and can properly offer health screenings, we’re requesting that every school have a nurse on-site.
   ✓ Due to budget constraints, some schools have been operating without nurses. In this unique time, with our nation facing the worst health crisis in a century, we believe it is essential for every school to have a nurse in the building.

“ My biggest fear is schools opening before they are ready. I don’t think the city should have reopened as fast as it did. With schools, I have a lot of scary things running through my mind. How will you protect yourselves and our children? Home learning is stressful. I am doing it for four children in different grades, but I know my babies are safe at home.”

—Reaven Allen, public school parent

2. Taking an intentional approach to the first few weeks of school, focusing on understanding student needs and forging teacher/parent partnerships

This upcoming school year will be unlike any other. Not only will our children face new restrictions and class rules, many will begin the year facing additional stress and trauma created by the post-COVID crisis. And some will have even more emotional scarring from the horrendous murder of George Floyd and the protests and focus on systemic racism that followed. Academically, we’re greatly concerned about the learning loss that’s taken place with the extended time out of school.

To overcome all these challenges, we believe it will take an unprecedented level of partnership between parents and teachers. This partnership, we believe, will need to be established in the first few weeks of the new school year. It will take a very intentional approach from both teachers and parents to set new norms for communication and ensure everyone is unified around the emotional needs and academic plans for our children.

1. Detailed plans need to be in place in each school for establishing teacher/parent partnerships to begin the year.
   - We recommend setting up “virtual home visits” at the start of school, where teachers use a video call to connect with parents.
     - The focus of these first virtual visits is to establish trust and an open line of communication between parent and teacher.
     - Schools should set goals for the percentage of teacher/parent visits that are completed before the first four weeks of school are complete.

2. Create a transparent system where parents and teachers are on the same page about a child’s academic challenges and social and emotional needs.
   - We want to know where our children are academically early in the school year, understand what the gaps are, and learn what can be done to support growth in those areas where our children are behind.
     - We support some sort of assessment that provides parents with a clear picture of the learning loss that may have taken place.
       - With this information, we as parents can be in the best position to help support our children through home learning.
     - Parents and teachers should be aligned on an academic plan for the year that sets clear goals for each student and informs parents on the role they need to play to support growth toward these goals.
The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on our way of life as a whole. And in the midst of this pandemic, we have had racially motivated murders by policemen in our communities. This pandemic and racial injustice has taken too many lives, touching our families and our community even more. We need a support system of teachers, mental health counselors and parents who can create an environment of learning amid the stresses and anxieties of these moments in time.

—Denise Ford, public school parent

2. Taking an intentional approach to the first few weeks of school, focusing on understanding student needs and forging teacher/parent partnerships

✓ We want to ensure schools are ready to serve our children’s social and emotional needs.
  ○ Parents are partners with teachers when it comes to sharing about the stress and fear our children may be feeling. We want to provide this input to teachers to help inform their approach for supporting our children.
  ○ It is a fact that the overwhelming majority of Indiana teachers are white. This will heighten the need for school districts that serve large minority populations to adequately prepare teachers to address the emotions black students may feel after the George Floyd murder and witnessing news coverage of violence against black protestors.
  ○ We request that schools focus on social and emotional learning – especially in the first few weeks – using a credible, research-based curriculum.
    • Example: casel.org
  ○ Schools should ensure they are appropriately staffed with counselors to handle the increase need, and ensure these counselors are racially responsive in supporting children.

✓ All IEPs should be updated to account for potential learning loss and continued remote learning.
  ○ As parents of children with special needs, we know how challenging the transition has been to home learning. Many of our kids thrive on routine and count on support being provided in person.
  ○ We want to ensure all IEPs are updated to account for the likelihood of home learning, so that new norms are set and we can begin supporting our children’s adjustment to a new schedule and changes in how services are being delivered.
3. Re-envisioning the school calendar and education practices to reflect the post-COVID realities

Home learning is incredibly challenging (and frustrating at times) for parents, if we’re being honest. The challenges mount when you add work schedules to the mix, along with multiple children all on different educational journeys. With all this said, we as parents have embraced home learning and realize it’s here to stay for the foreseeable future. We see COVID-19 as an opportunity to make changes and enhancements that can improve education even after this crisis is over.

The data is clear that there is a big opportunity gap that exists between our kids of color and their white peers. This gap has been present for generations, long before COVID-19. We need ways to help our children catch up academically. Not just during the crisis, but for the long run. That’s why we embrace overhauling the school calendar as we once knew it.

Plan to extend the 2021 school year, and potentially future school years.

- We embrace the recommendations made in the school reopening report published by Chiefs for Change calling for more school days, as well as longer days.
  - The data show more learning time helps students make additional gains.

Make home learning part of the regular academic calendar.

- We must assume remote learning is here to stay for the foreseeable future, so let’s plan for it.
  - Home learning days should be determined as much in advance as possible to help parents account for work schedules and childcare.
  - Every student needs quality home internet and a connected device. Without this, educational inequities will persist and our kids most in need will be left behind.
  - The home learning plan must support schoolwork being graded and feedback being given by teachers.
    - After COVID-19 struck, there were examples of schoolwork being done but no review of that work by educators. Participation was counted, but the content was not graded. This can’t happen next academic year if our children are to improve and learn the material needed to be successful in life. School must matter, and parents must know what material our children are not understanding or if there are assignments not being turned in.
    - While schoolwork needs to count, we also believe supportive grading practices are important. By this we mean giving students opportunities to correct mistakes, make up missed assignments and retake tests to ensure the material is learned.
  - Curriculum must support English language learners and recognize that some parents supporting their children at home do not speak English.
  - Contingency plans need to be in place to offer paper packets to students learning at home in the event technology does not work.
3. Give parents the option for extended home learning in the event they have concerns about their children’s health and well-being.

✓ As parents, we want to ensure next year provides the academic rigor our children need, but we also want the flexibility to continue home learning and ensure our children are not counted absent or forced out of our chosen school.

“I honestly believe summer school is going to be needed. People may not like it, but these kids are missing out on a lot of learning.”

—Swantella Nelson, public school parent

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1 https://in.chalkbeat.org/2018/10/3/21105864/as-indiana-test-scores-remain-flat-overall-gaps-are-growing-between-race-and-income-groups
4. Thinking creatively about teacher roles and talent to improve home learning

We understand that teachers are the single most important factor in determining academic success. That’s why several of the parents who have helped inform this document have long been advocates for dramatically increasing teacher pay⁴ and creating new roles and career growth opportunities⁵ for great educators who want to expand their leadership.

With more home learning likely coming next school year, we think schools should think creatively in establishing new teacher roles. Schools should leverage the leadership of great teachers and play to the strengths of staff across the school. The traditional school staffing model, with one classroom teacher and a teacher’s aide, may not translate as effectively when lessons are being taught online. As parents, we’ve noticed that some teachers are better at guiding a lesson over a Zoom call, while others are excellent providing one-on-one or small group support with our children.

1. Districts and schools should approach home learning with a staffing plan that plays to teacher strengths and acknowledges the needs of kids learning at home.
   - Teachers uniquely gifted in online instruction should give lessons to students across grades and classes.
   - Teachers not focusing on instruction should form teams to support children in small groups and one-on-one settings.
2. These staffing approaches should also account for the need to increase regular parent-teacher communication to establish feedback loops on children’s academics and well-being.
   - While parent–teacher conferences happen typically once or twice a year, we believe these conferences should at least double in occurrence knowing that communication between home and school will be more important than ever.

“Teachers are important and we need to invest in them. They need the trainings and the tools to be the best teachers they can be for our students when they return to school, online or in-person. They need both resources and support from staff and families.”

—Sashah Robertson, public school parent

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⁴http://stand.org/sites/default/files/indiana/Addressing_Indiana%27s_Quiet_Teaching_Crisis_FINAL_1.25.19.pdf
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