

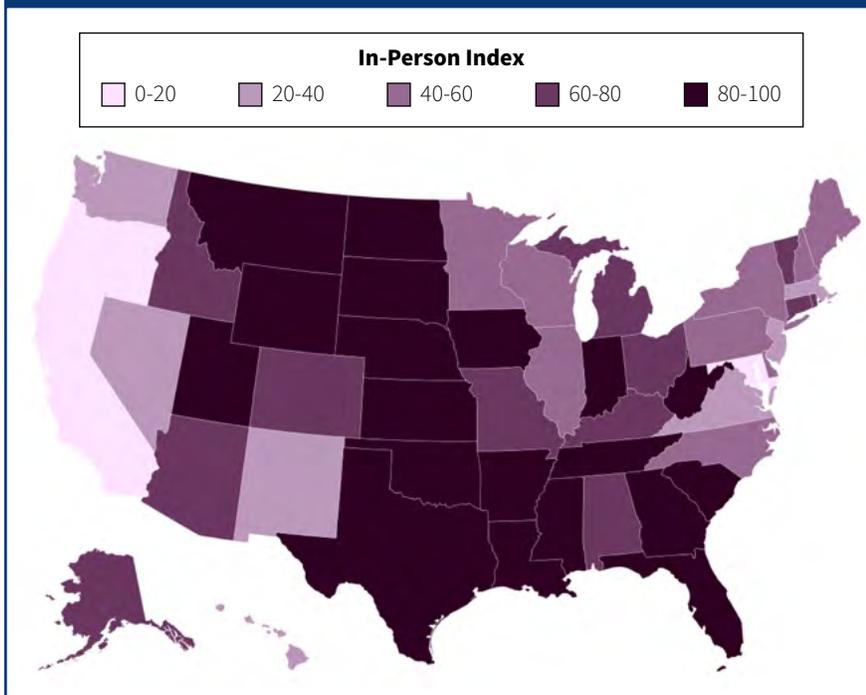
LEADERS' ROUNDTABLE: Reopening Schools Safely

The Senate Presidents' Forum continued its provocative online meeting series with a March 5 session focused on "Reopening Schools Safely." Senate leaders from around the country reported what their states are doing to sustain or rebuild educational momentum in their states.

Introduction

Moderator Tom Finneran introduced the discussion by reviewing a map reflecting how many students were attending school in-person, virtually, or in a hybrid model in each state. The in-person index showed two states (California and Oregon) with the fewest students attending in-person classes, while in 21 states most students were attending in-person.

In-Person Index for K-12 Public Schools



The Index is calculated by weighting % virtual instruction at 0, % hybrid instruction (2-3 days per week in-person) at 50, and % traditional (5-days in person) at 100.

Sourced on March 4: <https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/>

The Forum Welcomes New Senate Participants



Sen. Mo Denis

*Senate President Pro Tempore
(Nevada)*



Sen. Matt Huffman

*President of the Senate
(Ohio)*



Sen. Dean Kirby

*Senate President Pro Tempore
(Mississippi)*

An interactive version of the *In-Person Index Map*, plus a map showing county-level in-person participation, is updated regularly at [Burbio](https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/).

A major concern discussed by the Forum participants is the impact of learning loss on future educational and professional outcomes. Mr. Finneran referenced an article — [The Long-term Economic Costs of Lost Schooling](#), from *The Wall Street Journal*, 02/25/2021 — quoting economists who predict that over the next century the “skill shock” of learning loss during the pandemic will produce \$25 trillion to \$30 trillion of lost economic output in today’s dollars, and that the lifetime household incomes of affected students will be 6% to 9% lower.

Discussion



Moderated by
Tom Finneran



Sen. Phil Berger (Senate President Pro Tempore, North Carolina): Like most states, North Carolina has school districts operating as all in-person, hybrid (virtual and in-person), and all virtual. About 90 of the state’s 115 school districts are already open or planning to open soon for some level of in-person learning. Senate Bill 37, which would mandate opening options but with fewer restrictions than the Governor wants, passed both chambers with bipartisan support, but was vetoed by the Governor. There was a failed attempt to override that veto but now there is bipartisan support for reopening and for eliminating the “all-virtual” option except for parents who opt not to send their children to school in person. We have seen some very concerning data on the serious impact of learning loss during the past 12 months.



Sen. Hanna Gallo (Senate President Pro Tempore, Rhode Island): In Rhode Island, 200 school districts have offered in-person classes since September 2020, while 99 districts are hybrid with half of the student body trading off attending classes in person for two days and having virtual classes for the rest of the week. Only four districts offer virtual-only classes.

A colder northern state like Rhode Island faces issues over the lack of good ventilation especially in older schools, where windows must remain open to ensure air flow. Sen. Gallo, who is a speech language pathologist for the Cranston School Department, reported that her warmest classroom is 54°F. The freezing cold environment adds another level of difficulty to teaching and learning.

Key Issues Discussed in the Forum

- Learning loss from missing in-person school time
- Emotional disruption for children and need for mental health funding
- Facilities issues: ventilation, heating, air conditioning and need for funding to upgrade
- Prioritizing COVID vaccinations for teachers and school workers
- Disparities in wealthy vs. poor communities concerning broadband access, the availability of laptop computers, and the efficacy of virtual learning strategies, as well as the impacts of learning loss
- Family stress as families try to balance work, home, and school in social isolation.

Resources for Reopening Schools

The CDC offers guidance on when, where, and how schools can safely reopen in the [Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools](#) through Phased Mitigation.

The CDC’s [K-12 Schools COVID-19 Mitigation Toolkit](#) helps to assess hazards and implement mitigation strategies to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

Teachers can check vaccine eligibility and availability at [VaccineFinder.org](#) for 9,000 pharmacy locations across the US that are receiving COVID vaccines to administer to teachers and staff in pre-K-12 schools and childcare programs. [Learn more about the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program.](#)

“The warmest my classroom has been is 54°F.”

— Sen. Sen. Hanna Gallo

Some parents are reluctant to send their children to in-person school, while others are concerned about the lack of socialization if they do not have in-person school. However, with social distancing, in-person classrooms may have only a few students spread well apart, so “socialization” is limited. As a speech pathologist, Sen. Gallo also commented on the challenge of correcting speech problems while she and the children are wearing masks, highlighting additional challenges of the “new normal.”



Sen. Matt Huffman (President of the Senate, Ohio):

Ohio’s parents have been eager to get children back to in-person classes. The Governor and the Legislature agreed to allow

the 608 school districts to make local decisions about reopening, based on local COVID-19 status.

In the early days of the pandemic, school models for open or virtual classes followed geographic lines, with rural schools with low COVID infection rates continuing in-person classes while urban areas facing higher caseloads went to a virtual model.

However, the virtual model posed barriers in some urban neighborhoods where poverty limited access to computers and broadband was restricted. The Senate passed [Senate Bill 8](#), which would increase access to broadband services in underserved areas of Ohio through the creation of the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program. The bill is under review in the House.

The challenge of reaching urban students, the very children who need school support most—who had attendance problems or needed more help—remains. In fact, 47% of students in one district and 10,000 students in Columbus, OH, have not been heard from since last March 2020, with a staggering impact on a year of learning.

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Ohio offers robust school choices, and enrollment in private schools, where in-person classes have been maintained, is up substantially. For example, one Christian school’s enrollment escalated from 400 to 900 students, and more urban students are now accepting scholarships to private schools.

Making Up for Lost Learning in Ohio

The Ohio Senate is considering a one-time education savings account (ESA) program that will allow low-income students to access dollars for summertime tutors, camps, library programs, and other learning that would require fees.



Sen. Jake Corman (Senate President Pro Tempore, Pennsylvania):

Like other states, Pennsylvania has options for fully in-person, hybrid, or fully virtual classes, but most schools are

in-person. Reopening is guided by the Department of Health’s formula, which looks at the number of COVID cases to determine the level of in-person instruction. This results in a rural-urban divide: Schools in urban areas, where COVID caseloads are higher, remain fully virtual, and students who may need more help or have limited technology access may be underserved. In fact, there is some discussion that in-person schools, where there has been next to zero transmission, may be safer because teachers and students take proper precautions such as mask-wearing and social distancing. One concern is that contact tracing can result in children being excluded from sports if someone on the team tests positive for COVID.

The state has prioritized teachers and school staff to receive the first doses of the Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine.

Learning loss is a major concern, but we are also seeing some students who thrive with the virtual learning model by taking advantage of online opportunities such as Kahn Academy. We should learn from them for the future of education.



Sen. David Sokola (Senate President Pro Tempore, Delaware):

The state has the usual in-person, hybrid, and virtual schooling options, but also a very accessible home-school policy

and a healthy home-school network. Many students left private schools for home schooling; for example, those whose parents lost their jobs. But many students have gone missing from the school registers. Learning loss has been a grave concern, but the goal is to have all schools open by April. To accomplish this, an aggressive campaign to vaccinate all teachers was launched and more than 3,000 people volunteered to support this initiative.

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Sen. Lee Schoenbeck (Senate President Pro Tempore, South Dakota):

All schools were closed last year from March 15 through the end of the school year. In this school year,

all schools have been open for in-person classes and 97% of students are attending in person. Some districts have had to close again for 10 days when COVID outbreaks occurred, but then reopened.

In our rural state with many Native Americans living on reservations, the Indian Health Service (IHS) has done a great job getting vaccines to the reservations, making it safer for those children to attend school in person.

Sen. Karen Fann (President of the Senate, Arizona):

On March 5, Arizona's Governor removed all COVID restrictions requiring masks, social distancing, and limited seating for indoor dining. As part of the opening

strategy, all schools will be open for in-person classes; however, the online option will be available through the end of the semester.



Sen. Ron Kouchi (President of the Senate, Hawai'i):

Hawai'i went to 100% distance learning in April 2020 through the end of the school year. In January 2021, students began to attend

school in person once a week, with those who were not performing well coming back for a second day. The CDC's new guidance for reopening public schools for in-person instruction indicates that most of the state would now fall in low or moderate transmission categories and so should allow full, in-person instruction.

While many states are reopening schools, Hawai'i's schools Superintendent Christina Kishimoto has taken a slow approach to reopening and has come under criticism for not providing adequate guidance to school districts. Some advocates suggest delaying reopening based on where hot spots of COVID infection are occurring, only if students have access to technology to continue with virtual learning. By now, we have trained the teachers to be better distance teachers and have provided better equipment.



Sen. Bill Ferguson (President of Senate, Maryland):

As the father of first- and third-grade children, Sen. Ferguson reflected the parental urgency for children to get back to

safe, in-person learning. Maryland has asked that all schools voluntarily reopen for in-person instruction by March 15, with a two-week leeway if needed. The state's 24 public school districts have lost 4.8% of their enrollment as students moved to private schools, which remained open.

The academic outcomes of lost in-school time are profound. For example, 65% of Baltimore's ninth graders had Grade Point Averages (GPA) less than 0.5 (on a scale where 4.0 indicates a grade of all A's).

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The priorities for Maryland's state legislature are:

1. Get the schools open
2. Identify students' educational gaps
3. Provide resources for those students who have fallen behind
4. Provide mental health resources for students and families to address the emotional toll of the pandemic, such as anxiety

Plans to recapture missing school time by extending summer school are faced with facilities challenges in older schools where there is no air conditioning. Currently, there is support growing for having students return to school in August and defer the standard Spring testing to the Fall. We anticipate real recovery for the schools in the Fall.



Sen. Mo Denis (Senate President Pro Tempore, Nevada): Nevada has 17 public school districts and one charter school, with more than half of students living in the Clark County School

District, which includes Las Vegas.

More than 70% of Nevada school districts have been granted leeway to deviate from state emergency directives issued during the COVID-19 pandemic. School districts are allowed to submit a "variance" request to waive certain requirements if they "impermissibly restrict educational opportunities for students." Schools must propose an alternative and outline how they would minimize any potential risk of coronavirus transmission. Variances fall into three categories: social distancing, occupancy standards, and transportation standards.

Current directives require three feet of social distancing space between elementary and middle school students, and six feet for high school students and all employees. There's also a 50-person limit or 50% capacity requirement — whichever is lower — in any given space at a school. And at least three feet of social distancing space is required between passengers on school buses.

The vast majority of schools are operating with full-time, in-person classes or under a hybrid model — a mix of in-person and distance learning — and many are in rural areas where rates of coronavirus are lower than in urban areas. In Clark County, the student population is split and the two groups alternate, attending in

person for two days and then online for two days. By April, the goal for Clark County is to have mostly in-person classes for elementary grades and hybrid classes for middle and high school students.

The legislature is looking to use federal funds to provide summer school to help students catch up, and also to ensure that every student has online access if needed. They are also reviewing statutes related to academic testing, with the goal to delay testing and allow children time to catch up.



Sen. Jeremy Miller (President of the Senate, Minnesota): The number one concern of parents is to get their children back to school in person.

Currently, all three models — virtual, in-person, and hybrid — are in use, with hybrid being the most frequent. Enrollment has increased in private schools that have remained open.

Middle and high schools are open in most of Minnesota's largest school districts, as new state guidance urges a return to the classroom. Secondary schools can operate at either full or partial capacity as long as they follow additional strategies for mitigating the spread of the coronavirus.

Those measures include encouraging students to get tested for the virus every two weeks and a recommendation that schools maintain six feet of distance between secondary students, whenever possible, with three feet expected in elementary schools.

The school issue has highlighted differences between the Republican-majority Senate and Democrats holding the House and governorship. The Senate wants the Governor to relinquish the Executive Emergency powers granted during the pandemic, reduce restrictions on businesses, and allow local districts to make the decision on reopening.



Sen. Martin Looney (Senate President Pro Tempore, Connecticut):

Learning loss is the greatest concern and places a disparate burden on poorer students. A street-by-street

analysis of Internet connectivity across the state found that low-income students faced technical barriers. In wealthy neighborhoods, only 3 out of 50 students had difficulty accessing online classes; while in poorer

neighborhoods, 23 out of 50 students did not have access. Fortunately, we were able to take advantage of a public-private partnership and give laptops to students who could not afford them.

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— Sen. Martin Looney

Currently, more schools are hybrid or full-time in person, but grade equivalency after the pandemic is a worry. Too many students have fallen behind. Newly appointed Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, who was a Connecticut teacher and its state Commissioner for Education, is advocating for schools to return to in-person classes as soon as possible, and the state is ready to support this effort.



Sen. Tom Alexander (Chairman, Senate Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee, South Carolina):

Based on the legislative website as linked above, it is correct):

Since August 24, 77 of the state's 79 school districts have been in-person full time without any problems by following the prescribed safety protocols, such as mask-wearing and social distancing. The Senate passed legislation to move teachers and staff into priority position for the COVID vaccine, but this failed to pass in the House.

Meanwhile, enrollments in private and charter schools that remained open have increased, and the legislature allocated an additional \$9 million for public charter schools, and increased funding for testing.



Sen. Dean Kirby (Senate President Pro Tempore, Mississippi): Mississippi Connects is a program to provide every public-school student in Mississippi with the technology to learn at school

and at home. The [Equity in Distance Learning Act \(SB 3044\)](#) provided \$150 million to school districts to pay for computer devices for students and teachers, software to deliver instruction, enhanced internet connectivity and professional development for digital teaching and learning. The [Mississippi Pandemic Response Broadband Availability Act \(HB 1788\)](#) provided \$50 million to districts to help expand internet access to students living in unserved areas.

A major achievement is that laptop computers have been provided to all students and broadband access should be available to all students by the end of the school year. Most teachers have had their first vaccine and all will be fully vaccinated in the next few weeks.

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The governor has removed the mask mandate but the mask requirement will be decided by home rule. Cities still have a mask mandate. School reopening is being left to the discretion of the local school districts; for example, in some rural areas that have seen no COVID cases, schools have stayed open.

Conclusion

While Senate leaders face the daunting tasks of leading their states through these challenging times, the continuing Senate Presidents' Forum online series provides support and informative insights. Our next online session is scheduled for April 9 at 2:00 PM (ET).