



## Educator-Informed Recommendations for Opening Schools

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve and some Georgia districts prepare for a January 2021 second semester opening, PAGE urges caution and commitment to data-driven decisions that prioritize health and safety for educators and students. Districts that were virtual-only during the first semester, and which are now experiencing substantial spread of COVID-19, should consider temporarily delaying reopening for in-person instruction until the rate of community spread declines. PAGE recommends a phased return and strict adherence to safety-focused reopening criteria. These recommendations reflect direct input from more than 16,000 Georgia educators, administrators, and school personnel shared through a survey and conversations with PAGE staff in July 2020 as districts were preparing initial opening plans. The recommendations are further informed by the in-person school operations of many Georgia districts which utilized these recommendations during first semester openings, as well as updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and local health officials.

A phased reopening plan allows:

- Potential for community increases in COVID-19 cases to subside.
- Additional time to consider whether local conditions allow for safe opening of schools and for critical safety planning, communication, and training on safety plans and instructional models.
- Additional time for educators without high-risk conditions to return to the school environment, become familiar with, and practice the guidelines in safety plans.
- Devoted time to professional learning on instructional methods and lesson design in preparation for the likelihood of some instructional disruptions throughout the year due to closures.
- Parents and students to become fully familiar with district instructional models and expectations for adherence to safety protocols for in-person instruction.

### Recommendations

Educator concerns fall into two main categories: **Health and Safety** and **Preparedness**. These recommendations both reflect those concerns and create an opportunity to address them.

#### Health and Safety

1. Delay in-person opening of schools if substantial spread of COVID-19 is present in the community as determined through consultation with both local and state health officials.
2. Schedule 10 days of staff time in schools before students return for safety plan training and professional learning to prepare for the return to face-to-face and virtual instructional methods to accommodate the various models that most districts have proposed.
3. Communicate the district and school plans to staff before they report for the first day of on-site work. Safety plans should be clear and comprehensive on the procedures that will keep staff and students safe, including how positive cases of COVID-19 will be handled. Safety plans should continue to evolve according to new health agency guidelines, staff input, and experience.

CONTINUED ON REVERSE

## Health and Safety (continued)

4. Require adults and students to wear face coverings in accordance with guidelines from the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).
5. Make accommodations for staff with underlying health conditions and high-risk household members a priority above requiring staff to take leave. Establish clear guidelines on leave policies, including the range of available leave and any impact on compensation.
6. Limit increased duties that come from both in-person and virtual learning by not assigning teachers course loads that require them to perform double duty. Allow virtual-only teachers who can accomplish their work remotely outside the school setting to do so to limit their exposure to others, especially when that assignment is to accommodate a high-risk condition.
7. Commit to ongoing communication and transparency about all decisions which affect staff and student health and safety.
8. Establish a clear and well-defined method for staff to express concerns about safety plan implementation, work conditions, and violations of safety guidelines without fear of retaliation.
9. Allow educators on contract who decide not to return due to health, safety, or dependent care concerns to resign without penalty, liquidated damages, or referral to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission for abandonment of contract.

## Preparedness

Beyond virus-related health risks, the concern most often shared by educators with PAGE is that their schools and districts are not adequately keeping them informed about school opening plans or providing evidence that their concerns are being considered and incorporated into opening plans. Educators do not yet feel confident that they will be provided with the necessary training and resources to safely return to on-site instruction or be prepared for virtual options.

Educators must feel confident that they:

- See, understand, and have input into the district plan before reporting to work;
- Have assurances that these plans will continue to be refined and communicated to all stakeholders once staff are in the building and have time to learn, practice, and revise safety plan protocols;
- Have assurances – as evidenced by a defined and sufficiently communicated plan – that students will not return to the classroom before understanding the required health and safety protocols and expected behaviors; and,
- Will receive professional learning that will enable them to provide exceptional instruction whether school opening plans are exclusively on-site, virtual, or hybrid.