

Officials: Reopening NY schools won't be easy

Many logistical challenges will delay an opening anytime soon

Gary Stern Rockland/Westchester Journal News I USA TODAY NETWORK

While many hold out hope that New York's schools may reopen before summer, the challenges of safely returning students and staff to classrooms while maintaining social distancing appear too great to be handled in a matter of weeks, district officials said.

"I want to open tomorrow, but I don't see it," said Ossining Superintendent Ray Sanchez, president of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents. "Everyone wants to know when schools reopen, but the real question is how we reopen. If there will be safety requirements, we have to grapple with that. You want to be optimistic, but realistically, we're preparing as if schools won't open soon."

New York's schools are currently closed through May 15. Most school districts are scheduled to break for summer six weeks later.

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Iris Rosado and Will Cabrera, bus drivers with the Union Free School District of the Tarrytowns, deliver laptops April 6 in Sleepy Hollow to students who need them to do their coursework.

TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

The state is still not ready to close schools for the rest of the academic year, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday.

virus.

"Let's get the data," he said. "In the meantime, schools will not open until we say schools will open statewide."

At his daily coronavirus briefing, Cuomo said reopening school buildings throughout the state before the end of the academic year in June would be a “very, very big undertaking.”

Cuomo reiterated Monday that any decision to reopen schools would be a state decision after he and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio got into a tiff after the mayor announced city schools would close for the year.

Will NY reopen schools? It remains unclear

School officials said once Cuomo declares when schools can reopen, and the state sets safety guidelines for schools, only then will educational leaders be in a position to plan scheduling and staffing for what promises to be a difficult transition.

But doing so in the near term — particularly in New York City and its suburbs, where the majority of coronavirus cases and deaths are located — seems increasingly difficult, they said.

“It’s hard to imagine a scenario where we open schools before the end of the school year,” said David Albert, spokesman for the state School Boards Association. “The uncertainty is overwhelming. Schools can’t turn on a dime and impose social distancing, or other restrictions, in a bus, a classroom, a cafeteria.”

Even planning to reopen schools in September would be challenging.

Many districts are starting to draw up rough re-entry plans, many of which call for staggering school schedules in order to have fewer students in school at once and to keep students and staff apart.

Officials are looking at having students come to school in mornings or afternoons, or perhaps every other day.

Online learning would likely remain a key component of schooling if students are in classrooms part-time.

Educators would have to gauge not only where students stand academically, but whether they are psychologically and emotionally ready to be in a public setting and to learn.

Return to schools brings myriad questions

Sanchez said schools will have to be flexible enough in their planning to adapt programming once they know more about how students have been affected by the crisis.

“We won’t know the extent of students’ needs until we have them in front of us,” he said.

Schools will also have to be prepared to deal with families who do not feel ready to send their children to school and staff members who may feel uncertain about returning to their workplace.

“Some parents may feel that ‘I don’t want to take a risk with my children,’” said Bob Lowry, deputy director for the state Council of School Superintendents. “A lot of bus drivers are older and may not want to return. This has taken an emotional toll on students and families, on everyone. We really don’t know what might happen when schools open.”

De Blasio said students and staff will ultimately have to return to schools where teachers and principals have died because of the virus. At least 50 city school employees have died from coronavirus, according to The New York Post .

De Blasio announced earlier this month that students wouldn’t return until the fall, but Cuomo overrode him, saying it would be the state’s decision.

Whenever students return, the mayor said, mental health support needs to start now and continue. New York has had more than 14,000 deaths due to the virus, but far the most in the nation and with the majority of those in New York City.

“It’s going to be a painful beginning trying to sort out how to move forward while recognizing the loss and the trauma that kids have been through,” de Blasio said Monday.

Returning to school, but at what cost?

Another concern are the costs that may come with reopening schools.

“I’m less concerned about academics than creating support for students’ mental health needs,” said Frances Wills, who joined the state Board of Regents on April 1, representing Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Dutchess counties.

“We may need additional help to deal with unanticipated problems that students will face when they come back. Staff, too. They may be frightened of coming back and the possibility of being infected. We are challenged, but we will make schools a safe haven again.”

Business, geographical factors

Cuomo said Wednesday that calling off the rest of the school year would be a tacit admission that nonessential businesses would also remain closed through June, which the Democratic governor said he’s unwilling to do at this point.

“When you say you’re not going to open schools, you may as well say you’re not going to open businesses because they two are connected,” Cuomo said. “I don’t know how you open businesses without opening school. You want me to go to work? Hallelujah. What do I do with my kids?”

Cuomo continued: “To say we’re not going to open businesses until June, I’m not there yet. I don’t think anybody is there yet.”

Neighboring Massachusetts and Pennsylvania have closed their school buildings for the rest of the academic year.

Cuomo has repeatedly said it’s important for neighboring states to collaborate on their approach, launching a multi-state reopening task force earlier this week that includes at least seven states.

Cuomo acknowledged it’s plausible that schools in some parts of the state could reopen sooner than others, though he didn’t commit to doing so.

Of the state’s total COVID-19 cases, the vast majority have been in New York City and its suburbs, leaving open the possibility that the state could reopen schools in regions that have had far fewer cases.

School districts will likely be required, for instance, to have more extensive cleaning and sanitizing routines than in the past.

They may be expected to have equipment like thermometers and face masks. Staggered schedules could mean having school buildings open longer each day.

Cuomo said Wednesday that school districts would also have to put together programs and measures to ensure some level of social distancing, a challenge to pull together in a matter of weeks when many school buildings are crowded as they are.

But state aid to schools was frozen for the 2020-21 school year and could be cut by 20% or more, Cuomo said, if more federal aid is not forthcoming.

NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said that a lack of funding will be the greatest challenge facing districts when schools reopen.

Already their school budget votes have been pushed back from May 19 to at least June 1 for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

“We need the federal government to provide additional stimulus funding for schools and for the state to seek new revenues — through taxes on the ultra wealthy — that can aid public education,” Pallotta said. “We know there is no substitute for the learning that happens in our classrooms, and now is not the time to deny schools the resources they need to provide for communities statewide.”

Jon Campbell, of the New York State Team, contributed.

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“Theoretically, could you? Yes,” Cuomo said. “Could you say North Country schools will open with all those provisos? Yes.”

Still, any decisions would be based on data and expert opinion as the state continues to strain to contain the



Students and teachers at Rochester School for the Deaf are staying connected during the coronavirus pandemic. PROVIDED