

WHAT NY SCHOOLS HAVE TO DO TO REOPEN THIS FALL

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo may not decide until early August whether schools will reopen in the fall, but New York's school districts and private schools will be plenty busy until then trying to meet dozens of demanding state requirements for how schools must operate in person, remotely or both.

The state Health Department on Monday released an extensive list of health and safety requirements for schools to meet. The state Education Department was supposed to unveil its own guidelines Wednesday, but officials said they will be released Thursday.

School districts, BOCES and private schools have until July 31 to submit plans for the fall to Albany.

Schools will likely appreciate the granular nature of the state's requirements on matters of health and science, but will need money to implement them, said Jay Worona, deputy executive director and general counsel for the New York State School Boards Association. He said that districts still face a 20% cut in their state aid unless a federal bailout helps close New York's budget gap.

"I don't know what the cost will be of doing all of these things, but I know it won't cost less" than prior operations, Worona said. "It's daunting and scary because we don't know if we can afford to implement all that's in there."

Here are key questions regarding what schools must do, based on the Health Department's requirements:

What will it take for schools to reopen?

Cuomo announced Monday that schools will be allowed to reopen if they are in a region with a 14-day average daily infection rate of 5% or lower that is also in Phase 4 of economic reopening. Cuomo will make

has a temperature, they must be isolated immediately before being sent home.

Districts must also screen faculty and staff daily to determine whether they have experienced symptoms, been exposed to COVID-19 or traveled to a state under the New York State Travel Advisory. Students should be screened periodically.

It is strongly recommended that screening be conducted at home, before students and staff report to school.

"The screening for students should be taking place before children ever leave the home," Ricca said, adding that it's unlikely schools can take thousands of temperatures at the door. "We need the assistance of parents and guardians. That's really going to be important."

What happens if students or staff become ill?

Districts and schools must have protocols for if a student or staff member develops symptoms at school. Individuals would have to be isolated in school, and plans would need to be in place for how parents or guardians would pick up an ill student.

A school where a student or staff member came down ill would not necessarily have to close, but would have to close off and disinfect areas used by the person.

Districts will also need plans to alert people who were in proximity to someone with COVID-19.

Districts also must consult with their local health department to create requirements for when students and others who had COVID-19 symptoms can return to school.

Someone who tested positive for COVID-19 would already have to be released from quarantine, and their return to school would be "conducted in coordination with the local health department."

an initial decision based on the data in the first week of August, but a region's status could change if COVID numbers worsen before the first day of school.

Because of this, schools have to be prepared for three scenarios: all in-person learning, all remote learning, or a hybrid of the two with students in school part time.

Districts must submit plans to the state that address all three potential situations and that lay out how they will meet state requirements for each.

Will students and staff have to wear masks?

The Health Department is strongly recommending face coverings at all times, except when individuals are eating or seated for instruction with appropriate social distance.

Face coverings are required when students and staff cannot maintain distance.

The Health Department guidance does allow individual districts to require face coverings at all times, but recommends that they plan for "face covering breaks" for students.

Students who can't tolerate a face covering for medical reasons are exempt.

What will social distancing requirements be?

The Health Department is requiring students and staff to maintain social distancing, defined as six feet in all directions, unless physical barriers are used to separate people.

Additionally, students who sing, play wind instruments or do physical activity would need 12 feet on all sides.

Schools are urged to reconfigure all school space, and to consider the use of municipal facilities and outdoor grounds, to create as much space as possible for in-person instruction.

How should students be grouped?

The Health Department urges schools to get all students into schools, if possible, "to ensure equity in education."

But it also says plans should indicate whether certain students will be prioritized for in-person instruction, like young students, those with disabilities or those with limited English.

And it recommends that schools put students, especially young students, in small, self-contained groups that have minimal interaction with other groups. The state Education Department will likely have more to say on this.

Mike Tierney, superintendent of the Dover Union Free School District, said the district is considering keeping children in the same classroom throughout the day, with teachers switching rooms. "So we would just have teachers in the hallway, instead of putting 100 kids in the hall at the same time," he said.

What educational requirements are schools expected to meet?

The Education Department is expected to release a full set of reopening guidelines on Thursday, but the Board of Regents gave a preview Monday.

Schools must be prepared to continue instruction if buildings suddenly close and to prioritize "substantive daily interaction" between students and teachers.

Districts must take an inventory of students' technology needs and provide devices and Wi-Fi to students and teachers "to the extent practicable."

Schools must also continue providing special education services and education for English language learners regardless of setting.

Might schools be forced to close again?

The Health Department requires that districts' plans identify conditions that would warrant "reducing in-person education or closing the school."

Schools will also need protocols to promote social distancing for bathroom use and common areas.

How will busing work?

Students are required to wear face coverings at all times on school buses, but the social distancing requirement is somewhat ambiguous.

The state Board of Regents, during a preview Monday of its forthcoming education guidelines, did not mention social distancing on buses, and the Health Department guidance said passengers “should” maintain social distance.

Joseph Ricca, president of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents and superintendent of White Plains schools, said he interpreted it as a call to social distance on buses when possible — which in many cases, it won’t be.

“I think that’s why you must wear face coverings,” Ricca said. “Because if you go back to most of the guidance, if you can’t have that six-foot physical distancing, that’s when you absolutely have to have a facial covering on.”

How will students and staff be screened?

Everyone entering a school building must have their temperature checked.

If it is above 100 degrees, they must be denied entry to the school. If someone already in the school

Schools are expected to consult with the state and local health departments to do so.

Plans are also supposed to include processes that would be used to conduct the orderly closure of schools and the transition back to remote learning.

Poughkeepsie Journal staff writer Katelyn Cordero contributed to this report.