

A photograph of a classroom with rows of wooden desks and orange chairs. A green chalkboard is visible in the background. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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Ten Tips to Help Educators Prepare for the Fall 2020 Return to School

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Ten Tips for a Semester Like No Other...

The spring 2020 semester was one like no other. Amidst a pandemic, social and racial unrest, and the resulting economic recession, educators made the best of a tough situation. We'd like to be able to say that the worst is behind us. But, this past semester has taught us to be more pragmatic than that. The fall 2020 semester is sure to hold a number of twists and turns for our schools and universities. We don't know what the future holds. **We do, however, know that collective wisdom and support from students, families, communities, and colleagues have gotten us through trying times before.** With that spirit in mind, we offer the following tips for educators gazing into their crystal balls regarding what the fall 2020 semester might look like.

Our list of tips is by no means exhaustive. State agencies such as the Texas Education Agency (2020) or Department of Health and Human Services have provided definitive guidelines educators should follow. We offer many guidelines in the resources section below. Our tips are meant to spur dialogue about what educators can do to support student learning and the decision points educators should be considering now in preparation for the fall. We also readily admit that these tips are formed by our collective educational experiences and are written for both K-12 and higher education practitioners in the hopes that we can spark dialogue into preparations for the fall 2020 semester in the quickest way possible. With the fall 2020 opening right around the corner, we don't have the luxury to test some of our assumptions and hypotheses. So we offer these opinions merely as ones informed by a collective 45 years of experience as educators, researchers, and in Dr. Walkley's case, a medical expert. A recurring theme in our tips is that research is not finalized on many aspects of COVID-19 and educators will have to adapt to complex situations this fall. Our attempt here is to offer a few discussion points to help prepare educators for these adaptive moments. Many more minds can share ideas that might improve upon this list. We encourage you to do so among your teams, families, communities, colleagues, and with us. With this spirit in mind, we hope to offer some insights that may support your decision making in the weeks and months to come.

1. *Educate students and parents that next year is not going to be like years' past.*

The fall 2020 semester will be nothing like prior semesters. For one thing, many social gatherings, athletic events, assemblies, and traditions may be canceled. Adding these to a long list of cancelations from the spring and summer is taking a toll on students, instructors, families, and communities. Additionally, we will need to orient all students to the formal concept of social distancing. Strict social distancing measures could be new for some students, whose home situations have not allowed a focus effort on social distancing. As schools reopen and return to some form of operation, social distancing measures will have to adapt to these new realities. Students will not be accustomed to safety measures on the bus, the playground, in the band hall, or a lecture hall. They will need to be taught how to be healthy and distant while being together. Educating them and their families about these new protocols now—before the start of fall classes—is key to the reasonable expectation that they will be practiced once classes begin.

2. *Determine reasonable methods for dealing with the COVID slide.*

Educators know about the summer slide. This summer, the COVID slide will be even more pronounced. Assuming standard rates of learning loss that occurred earlier in the year and last longer due to normal fall 2020 start dates, students could lose between 3 to 5 months of learning this summer (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Institutions should have a plan for assessing student learning once the fall semester begins and developing a plan for learning thereafter. Leaders should work to ensure they obtain the greatest amount of financial and community support for teachers who will have many challenges to overcome this fall.



3. *Establish protocols that keep people safe (such as face covering requirements) using the best available information possible, knowing that all information is flawed and incomplete.*

Keeping students, staff, and their families safe is on every educator's mind right now. But, as the pandemic is an emerging and developing situation, researchers simply have not had the time to examine what does and does not work for educating students. The CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report documented an instance in which a teacher traveled out of country, contracted COVID-19, and, while symptomatic, returned to teach her students, transmitting the virus to at least 2 of them (Brown et al., 2020). Reviewers concluded, "The risk for transmission from mildly symptomatic or asymptomatic persons is not well known. Widespread school closures have mostly eliminated the risk for classroom transmission of SARS-CoV-2. However, these results suggest that classroom interaction between an infected teacher and students might result in virus transmission" (paras. 7-8). In short, educational leaders will have to make high-profile, high-pressure decisions about learning and safety this fall, based upon evidence that is under-developed or non-existent.

For example, many have questioned whether or not students and teachers should be required to wear face coverings to return to campus in the fall, who should purchase them, how should they be disposed of, and whether schools and universities have the authority to impose such restrictions. Many are naturally questioning the role government plays in restricting choice and liberties. As a society, we certainly need more rigorous, respectful debate around these points, and researchers ought to contribute to the development of policies for future pandemics. Educational institutions and leaders should also adopt the mantra of "learning our way through this." Whenever policies hinder flexibility or consideration of a specific safety measures for individuals, policy manuals and campus handbooks should be reviewed and amended to ease students' and families' transitions through the current pandemic and plan for the next one.

However, the fall semester is nearly upon us. In such a time, we believe it is prudent to craft policies and practices that are flexible and are guided by educators' professional wisdom and the best available data to inform how to keep students and their families safe. Many of these resources are listed in our resource list below. With schools reopening, protocols for isolation, quarantine, extended leave, and remote learning—to name a few—should be in place as soon as possible. In crafting these directives, we recommend establishing firm and clear policies derived from medical experts' guidance and peer-reviewed, scientific research. We also caution educational leaders to remember that schools must still feel like a school to support the long-term social and emotional needs of students in tandem with their medical needs.

Draconian pronouncements that all staff *must* do something often breeds resentment and seldom work. Similarly, making individuals feel ostracized for wearing a face covering or ridiculing them because of one's own personal belief that they do not work may have an adverse psychological effect on students. In the instances when fellow educators have tested positive for COVID-19, we have seen that social scrutiny and peer pressure in our organizations are heavy and often exact a psychological toll that many did not anticipate. The coming school year will indeed see a number of colleagues, students, and their family member test positive for COVID-19. Allowing faculty, staff, students, and families reasonable opportunities to make decisions about the health of a school is important and advisable whenever possible, within the bounds of appropriate medical guidance.



Narratives and political discourses about face coverings could be overshadowing what should be the overriding message about pandemic health: *People who have any symptoms, even mild ones, should stay home, isolate themselves properly, and contact a medical provider for evaluation to determine if further testing is necessary.* Policies requiring face coverings may lead individuals with mild symptoms to believe they are protected from spreading any infectious agents to others. This false sense of security can lead them to believe they can go to work or school if they are wearing a face covering.

The current COVID-19 pandemic presents many nuances and challenges to our traditional systems of work and schooling in relation to mild respiratory complaints. In the past, advice from medical providers has typically been that patients need not miss work or school due to mild symptoms. The old adage of “stay home only if you have a fever” may need re-evaluation and re-training as schools open this fall. The TEA (2020, p. 3) has required schools to implement self-screening protocols for teachers and staff and has provided a self-screening questionnaire (pp.8-9). Educators and campus medical staff should re-educate parents, students, and staff, emphasizing they should stay home, isolate, and quarantine even for mild symptoms. Such shifts in policies will be aided by state recommendations that do not rely solely on student attendance or leave requests from staff for funding. These policy perspectives are also supported by professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) and the Centers for Disease Control (2020).

Allowing students and their families the flexibility to make decisions about their health is equally important. And lastly, personal freedoms and group health are often at odds. Leaders must be reasonable yet firm in their decision-making processes to keep all students healthy. This fall will test educational leaders in many ways. Use these months now to develop a leadership style that is adaptive, rather than regulative, in nature. Those seeking to regulate an emerging, complex situation are often left with few options as the situation develops. We believe those willing to adapt to complex situations lead more effectively throughout such challenging times.

4. *Be prepared to restructure your schedule.*

Whether that schedule is a semester calendar or a daily schedule, this fall educators will need to be able to adapt on a moment's notice. Daily schedules might be augmented to allow for more frequent personal hygiene breaks and environmental decontamination. Registrars and deans in higher education might need to consider how to revise registration or course withdrawal deadlines, for example. Instructors will certainly need to adjust their traditional or preferred pace of learning to accommodate students who may become ill, may be placed in isolation or quarantine, might need to care for family members, or are dealing with psychological stress. It is important to remember that flexibility is key, and no one should feel ashamed to change a plan. In fact, sticking with a plan despite evidence calling for its change is poor adaptive decision making in the current context.

5. *Campus medical staff should be supported in their need to physically isolate students, faculty, and staff who may be infected.*

As parents, we have seen it and even been guilty of it from time to time in the past. Our child goes to the school nurse saying he or she is sick. After taking the temperature, the nursing staff tell him or her to wait in the nurse's office until parents can pick him/her up. A few hours later, the parent arrives to pick up the sick student. In that time dozens of other students have been in and out of the nurse's office for daily scrapes, bumps, sniffles, and bruises, each potentially exposed to a sick child. Now more than ever, campus medical staff should feel empowered and supported by campus leadership to remove genuinely sick children from campus or a classroom. In instances where daily temperature readings are being taken, the authority to deny access on site should rest with medical staff, should be supported by campus leadership, and should be respected by parents and families. Employers and lawmakers have put into place a variety of protections through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that allow for leave to care for sick family members. Campus medical staff should work now to educate students and families that the classroom is not a medical ward. Sick children should stay home; those who develop sickness at school should be sent home. Districts should be prepared

with policies requiring the immediate isolation and required removal from school. This may require advanced thinking on the part of school, district or institutional leaders to augment policies, communicate expectations to families, and define protocols for a surge in sick students. Providing families with advanced notice of such policies can ease their transition and aid in securing childcare possibilities. Ultimately, school and institutional leaders must support medical staff in making determinations about individuals that keep campus communities healthy and safe.

6. *Aggressively educate faculty, staff, students, and parents on the need for even mildly ill individuals to stay home.*

Educators come into close contact with children hundreds of times a day. The risk of viral transmission in mildly-symptomatic or pre-symptomatic individuals is not well known (Brown et al., 2020). However, limiting exposure between symptomatic individuals and others is a high-impact practice that is likely to enhance health throughout the district or institution. We cannot reinforce this enough: even mildly symptomatic individuals should stay home.

The same holds true for teachers and staff. As educators and their families cope with COVID-19, HR directors and other leaders should be prepared to support them in their time of need. This may entail departures from standard HR practices or policies, and institutional leaders should be prepared to adjust policies as needed. It is plausible that staff may fully exhaust their leave hours, and given that, due to risk, most medical providers are not seeing potentially-infected COVID-19 patients in their offices, the age-old practice of requiring a doctor's note to excuse an absence may need to be reconsidered, possibly even abandoned entirely. Whenever possible and within reason, HR policies must be flexible to support these sorts of concerns. However, these considerations must also comply with state and federal laws. In particular, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2020) offers a variety of paid leave options many



educators have at their disposal. Additionally, staffing numbers may need to be increased; substitute teachers should be trained in new infection control practices and may be needed to offset the numbers of teachers who may be ill or in quarantine. This will likely take preparation on behalf of districts, as they look at training more substitute teachers and all staff in the coming weeks. Institutional HR staff have an opportunity to show compassion and caring in ways that can support staff as they cope with these difficult times.

7. *Leverage technology and other forms of interaction to enhance socialization and check in on parents, and students often.*

Many families began social distancing with great success. However, as the weeks pressed on, they began returning to normal work and life routines as boredom set in. In the coming weeks, additional state or local “stay at home” orders may be implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19. Social media and technology can and have been used to break up the monotony of social distancing and allow for interaction in a safe form. Holmes (2020) indicated that social media has seen a 15-18% increase in the number of posts in March and April 2020 compared to last year. Amidst the current pandemic, many already seem to turn to social media for interaction and engagement. But, other forms of engagement have also increased. Families have spent more time playing board and outdoor games and home improvement stores have posted record sales as families are staying home (King, 2020). Many families have found ways to connect via online meeting platforms and social media and schools may find it useful to continue to encourage such interactions if additional closures are implemented. This may not be possible for all students, but it can some stay connected and provide for social and emotional needs.

8. *Partner with local health authorities to educate students, families, and communities.*

But there are some limitations to social media. For all its strengths in connecting us, it can also drown out much of the reliable information on COVID-19. Many health authorities regularly release updates on COVID-19 and have developed messaging campaigns to inform the public about the spread of the disease. School and universities do not have to recreate the wheel nor do they have to rely on social media as a source of

reliable information. Relying on local and federal health authorities to spread the word about COVID-19 can present communities with a united, consistent message, thereby reducing confusion and fear. Institutional leaders should establish protocols or routine reviews of local health data and messaging to ensure students, staff, and parents are informed with the best available information. Educators should work to ensure they have clear lines of communication with students, families, and communities as soon as possible. Setting clear expectations around what will happen should a number of local and national health scenarios present themselves can reduce stress through planning.

9. Prepare all avenues of learning for use.

The spring 2020 semester saw many educators pivot to online learning with a moment's notice. The fall 2020 semester should not be that way. Institutions and schools have the benefit of foresight to develop and refine their plans for remote learning now. Many institutions surveyed parents, teachers, or students to see what went well and what could have been improved. These data may be invaluable as schools and institutions prepare for online learning. Even if schools resume normal or semi-normal activities in the fall, they may be required to suddenly move to remote learning. Moreover, internet disparities may continue to undermine districts and institutions' attempts to provide remote learning online. Districts must know their students' needs and concerns and should make every reasonable attempt to provide appropriate public education within state and federal guidelines. Surely, the fall semester will hold some twists, but educators can plan now for all aspects of instruction, safety, and student learning. The Center for Assessment, Research, and Educational Safety (2020) maintains a list of helpful resources for instructors moving to online learning. See the Resources and References list below.



10. Check in with colleagues, often.

This year promises to be one we will all remember for decades to come. In addition to asking students and parents about their needs for the upcoming fall semester, districts should also engage teachers, administrators, and staff about their desires and safety needs for the fall. Beyond medical concerns, psychological stresses of isolation, adaptation, and adjustment also present challenges. We've found journaling to be an effective means of dealing with stress while also documenting daily occurrences and emotions for latter reflection. Educators also need to check in on each other as they cope with the new realities of educating in a pandemic. Colleagues at our institution have implemented socially distant happy hours, "check ins," and "hang outs," as a means of staying connected and ameliorating some of the monotony while also checking on each other's mental health. Self-care and awareness of your own limitations are also key for adaptive leaders' success. Many of us are dealing with tremendous amounts of worry, anxiety, and stress. Wherever possible, afford each other some grace and maybe a calm, listening ear. In more critical instances, helping colleagues, students, and their families get mental health assistance may just save a life. Review these protocols and establish the expectation that we should check in on each other regularly.

Putting it all into practice will be a challenge and many plans will need to be adapted. We recommend practice at these new protocols prior to the schools year beginning. Superintendents, board members, teachers, staff, and community leaders could participate in a half day or full day "mock school day" where they participate in classes, bus rides, or extracurricular events under these new protocols. Doing so will show local leaders not just how school will be, but will also instill trust in students and

their families that the district has taken every precaution possible to support students this academic year.

We offer these tips as a way to initiate a preparation dialogue for the fall 2020 semester. It will be a semester like no other. Working together, we can ensure students have the best possible learning environment they can. We can also reflect on how education must adapt from the current pandemic and be resiliently prepared for the next.

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