



PLANNING FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION

A Guide to Reopening Schools

The onset of COVID-19 has changed public education in many ways. As a result, the 2020–2021 school year will look very different from previous years. Students have lost valuable instructional time. Families have been left out of important conversations and decisions. And educators have been operating without much needed guidance, support, and resources. In light of these challenges, the commitment to meeting the needs of every learner and designing a learning environment that is inclusive and responsive to all has never been more important.

The principles outlined below represent the goals school and district leaders should embrace along with specific actions they can take as they rethink how their approach to public education in the COVID-19 world. The principles are focused around meeting the needs of students with disabilities with the understanding that there may be additional considerations for students with disabilities who also come from low-income families or who are students of color or English learners. The intersectionality of these identities must be recognized and the needs of the whole child must be met by their schools.



Principle 1: Health and Safety

The first priority of states and districts must be ensuring the health and safety of students, educators, and school staff. Some students with disabilities may require one-to-one support or may be medically fragile or have other health conditions that place them at higher risk of contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus.

- States and districts should develop plans ensuring that students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment and beside their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible.
- States and districts should follow all Centers for Disease Control recommendations for reopening schools in a way that keeps students, educators, and staff safe and healthy.
- States and districts should develop plans that provide instruction to students five days per week—whether virtual or in-person—and offer meaningful opportunities for students’ social and emotional needs to be met.
- States and districts can convene workgroups to determine how best to manage student and family health data in a way that protects privacy and ensures the health and physical safety of the school community.



Principle 2: Informed and Responsive Planning

States and districts must collaborate with all relevant stakeholders, including families of students with disabilities, to develop plans that fully meet the needs of students with disabilities during the 2020–2021 school year.

- States and districts should first learn from the 2019–2020 school year and take steps to determine how well schools met the needs of students and families, engaging with stakeholders through focus groups, surveys, and listening sessions. Districts and states can identify successful strategies and provide technical assistance to schools to expand those best practices and improve services and instruction for all students going forward.
- States and districts can inform their 2020–2021 planning by determining what new challenges students and families are facing, and then working with them to determine their needs for the new school year and what supports and strategies schools can implement.
- State and district plans should explicitly address how the unique needs of students with disabilities will be met. This should include specific strategies to provide the needed instruction and services—whether academic, behavior, or social and emotional—to help students with disabilities make up for lost instruction and continue to make progress in grade-level, developmentally appropriate, standards-based curriculum.


 **Principle 3: Equity in Funding**

States and districts should target funds to schools and communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, including students with disabilities.

- States and districts must continue to abide by *supplement, not supplant* (add to, not replace) and *maintenance-of-effort* (not reduce spending from one year to the next) provisions under federal laws—including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These provisions protect students with disabilities from receiving a substandard education.
- States and districts can prioritize closing the digital divide and ensure that students not only have access to internet connectivity and technology but that students with disabilities have access to appropriate assistive technologies and accommodations to benefit from distance learning opportunities.
- States and districts should not allocate funding to services or programs (e.g., voucher, fee-for-service, or for-profit programs) that in any way discriminate against students, including those with disabilities, or that take public funds from public schools.

 **Principle 4: Reimagine Learning**

States and districts must prioritize high-quality instruction and educational experiences, whether in person or through blended learning, and provide opportunities not just to remediate student learning but to accelerate it.

- States and districts should invest funds in a way that closes the digital divide and that aims to provide students equitable access to online instruction through high-speed internet access and appropriate assistive technologies.
- Districts should revisit curriculum decisions and ensure that educators are using evidence-based instructional strategies. Where districts are offering new pathways to learning (such as project-based learning or competency-based learning), they must provide the necessary supports, infrastructure, and accountability systems to meet the needs of students with disabilities and keep them on track.



Principle 5: Student and Educator Supports

States and school districts must ensure that students' academic, social, and emotional needs are addressed effectively upon their return to school. This means that **educators and other school professionals must have the resources to effectively serve these students in a comprehensive way**, in a working environment that is safe and that addresses educators' own mental health, physical health, and emotional well-being.

- Districts should offer training to educators and develop plans that encourage increased communication and collaboration with families in order to provide students with disabilities maximum access to the instruction and services outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
- States and districts should invest funding in and develop plans to provide support to students and staff who are experiencing trauma, homelessness, or any other life circumstance that results in increased mental, physical, social, or emotional health needs.
- Districts should develop a plan for meeting their obligation to evaluate students suspected of having a disability under IDEA upon their re-entry to school. Special care and attention should be given to determining whether a student's difficulties are due to a disability, rather than a consequence of lost instruction or trauma experienced during school closures. Schools should be ready to provide appropriate supports or services in either case.
- States and districts can invest in more robust resources, professional development, and support for educators who are struggling to provide evidence-based instruction and support students with disabilities, particularly in a virtual learning environment, and who may be navigating professional and personal COVID-related obstacles.



Principle 6: Promotion, Transition, and Graduation

States and districts must help students with and without identified disabilities stay on track for promotion and graduation during the COVID-19 crisis.

- Districts should develop policies that lead to equitable pathways for grade promotion for students with disabilities.
- Districts should develop policies and plans to ensure that, even in light of COVID-19 restrictions on in-person activities, students with disabilities secure appropriate documentation needed to receive accommodations in the workplace or in postsecondary education settings after high school, including a re-evaluation where necessary.
- Districts should conduct transition planning and provide postsecondary education guidance in ways that are flexible and responsive to student needs during COVID-19. This might include virtual educational and career counseling activities and virtual work-based planning opportunities.

For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email at policy@nclld.org.