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SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group
Considerations/Suggestions for Reopening Schools
Introduction

School closures due to the COVID-19 crisis have resulted in profound and historic shifts in educational structures never before experienced. The upheavals have been of seismic proportion. What started out as a health crisis, evolved into an economic and educational crisis. As uneven access to resources occurred, deeper social/civic crises have emerged, triggered by law enforcement and racial injustices. We are now just beginning to realize the extent and impact of these changes. As educational experts moved through the evolving crises there were lessons learned, opportunities missed, inequities unmasked, selfless humanitarian acts made, and monumental challenges met. We are now evolving into forward thinking about the reopening of schools. We do this in the context of a very changed environment with perhaps a deeper understanding of the importance of schools in relation to our national and state well-being. One thing is for certain, it was far easier to close schools than it will be to reopen schools.

Since the beginning of May 2020, SAANYS has been actively communicating with building- level administrators and program leaders to discuss the challenges encountered during school closures due to the COVID-19 crisis. SAANYS established a focus group on reopening schools (see Appendix A), the work of

which contributes greatly to the majority of this paper. Additionally, SAANYS has designed a robust professional development series focused on the reopening of schools and other pertinent areas of support to the field during the pandemic. SAANYS has been actively involved with state-level advisory councils and task forces. SAANYS' Executive Director Kevin Casey was asked to provide testimony to the Governor's Reimagine Education Advisory Council, and three other members are advisors to the Council. Additionally, we have six members and SAANYS' executive director participating on the NYSED Task Force on Reopening. This briefing provides a synopsis of the discussions and ideas garnered from the above activities and is intended to be a resource to building-level administrators and program leaders, as well as state-level advisory groups.

SAANYS cannot overstate our respect for the work of administrators statewide who have worked tirelessly under very stressful conditions to put the needs of students, staff, and community at the heart of their work.

Lessons Learned

The everyday challenges to providing remote learning, meal distribution, and childcare were daunting. However, the crisis demonstrated a considerable capacity for innovation. As traditional schedules and instruction abruptly stopped, districts found ways to reach students and provide instruction in ways that were innovative. It will be important as we think about reopening schools that we incorporate what we have learned during this pandemic into our reopening plans.

Information on lessons learned has been collected from internal surveys of members and numerous group discussions with members held over the past few months. The following are some of the most frequently heard comments on what we have learned since the March shutdown of New York State schools.

- ✓ Many of the lessons learned showed how responsive the educational system was during the first few weeks of school closures. However, over time a general consensus emerged that the educational organization needed to be more flexible. Organizational constraints, restrictive pre-COVID-19 regulatory and statutory requirements, and lack of sufficient resources became high hurdles.
- ✓ Staff learned to communicate with students and families differently and in many instances more effectively. The pandemic in some ways created a sense that everyone was involved with the crisis in one way or another. There was a need to continually reach out to families, which provided a better sense of family dynamics and needs.
- ✓ Support staff is a critical part of the educational infrastructure, however, their roles became blurred and support staff could have been used more effectively. Overall, more clearly defined roles for support staff in the reopening of schools needs to be made.
- ✓ There is a critical need to use electronic platforms more effectively. As soon as schools closed, the instruction provided through technology was more akin to emergency remote learning as opposed to an intentional planned program of distance learning. If the fall brings a hybrid situation, extensive additional professional development for teachers, students, and parents needs to be provided.
- ✓ Technology departments became technical support centers to families and other stakeholders. Some of their responsibilities turned from in-building responsibilities to distribution and maintenance of devices and technical support to ensure that devices were working for students and families.

- ✓ We learned that vulnerable student populations became even more vulnerable. Students in special education, ELL students, and students with mental health needs in many instances did not have the same educational experience during school closure as did students needing less support. Reduced individualized instruction, academic intervention, various therapies, and one-to-one engagement may have decreased during school closure.
- ✓ Grading policies needed to be very flexible due to inconsistency in instruction and uneven access to technology.
- ✓ Attending to the social-emotional needs of students and families was of paramount importance and will continue to be a priority.
- ✓ Creating relationships was crucial during the shutdown period. Newly forged relationships between staff in different school buildings and grade levels and between teachers, students, and parents became critical for ensuring that students remained connected.

The above examples of lessons learned reflect the lived experiences during the beginning phases of school closures. Many other lessons accumulated as time elapsed. Those lessons need to be subsumed into school district plans to reopen in an informed and safe manner.

The Reopening of Schools - This Fall

After much discussion and consideration, the SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group concurred that schools should reopen this fall, while acknowledging how complex that task is. This conclusion that schools should reopen in the fall is based upon a profound understanding of how vital schools are to the health and welfare of students and families. The importance of schools came into sharp focus during the COVID-19 crises. The core missions of schools were expanded to be not only

academic institutions, but also providers of meals, technological support, and childcare. Regardless of the many barriers and fear of reopening, our educators feel it is their duty to figure out how to reopen and move forward. The building-level administrators and program leaders on the Reopen Focus Group also felt that reopening schools will likely be a hybrid model, including partial on-site instruction, partial on-line instruction, and independent work. However, should COVID metrics remain stable, there may be schools that could fully open in-person this fall, adhering to NYS Department of Health guidance.

Another key factor in re-entering schools this fall should be planning for a reopening that is inclusive of all students. The Reopening Schools Focus Group believes that all students should start together, regardless of the strategies for reopening. Although there are many strategies for reopening that would support some students starting before others, the Focus Group feels that a staggered opening excluding some students would result in greater inequities and less than optimal results.

The work of the SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group concentrated on three areas: school health/safety/building reopening considerations, academics/instruction consideration and social-emotional/mental health considerations. The group acknowledges that the separation into three areas is arbitrary, as each area influences and informs the other areas.

Health/Safety/Building Reopening Considerations

Issues Related to Health/Safety/Cleaning Practices

- Districts should create rapid response teams to monitor reopening.
- Acquire sufficient cleaning products and “misting disinfection” machines. All products must be approved as safe for students and staff.

Acquisition may need to be a regional effort or acquired from a state stockpile.

- Acquire PPE for staff and students. Availability of all supplies may be problematic. Administrators will need to acquire sufficient supplies for their buildings.
- Determine school-level protocols for monitoring and subsequent actions to be taken if the use of PPE is not adhered to by students, staff, or others.
- Determine cleaning and implementation protocols during operational and non-operational hours.
- Determine method for assessing building capacity: possible strategies include calculation of percentage of total capacity, teacher-student ratios, or square footage/student.
- Add maintenance staff as needed to clean and disinfect buildings. The numbers needed will be significant and districts cannot rely on staff who were reassigned to this work during school closure, as such staff will be returning to their former responsibilities.
- Create isolation areas wherever possible. There will be a need to handle generic health-related needs and a room for suspected COVID-19 related symptoms. Both rooms should have a sink and bathroom capacity.
- Establish protocols for temperature taking of students and staff prior to the start of the school day. An effective process could be to conduct such screenings on buses prior to the arrival at school.
- Establish a COVID-19 database that includes results of staff and student testing, confirmed cases, and other information needed to ensure that schools continue to be a source of trusted information. Some districts are

considering posting this information on their websites, while adhering to privacy laws in order to ensure confidentiality.

- Establish a daily checklist for all staff to survey the status of their classroom and conduct daily staff meetings at the beginning of each day to review high priority needs. Submit additional needs to central office prior to student arrival.
- Include parents and community stakeholders into the planning for reopening schools.
- Delineate all protocols to staff. Make clear demarcation of expectations and roles and develop training videos, materials, and other professional development.
- Develop clear protocols for families regarding what to send with their child, expectations for students and families, and school access prior to students returning back to school.
- Clarify the role of school medical staff. Will the school nurse be allowed to conduct COVID-19 tests? Does the district have a physician? If not, how will the nurse get a script for the test? Will sick students be transported home and how will they access parents (assuming it may be difficult to immediately contact some parents)?

Issues Related to Building Access

- Maintain a careful record of who comes in the building. Maintain contact information about how to reach people in case tracing becomes necessary.
- Ensure one-way traffic in hallways, cafeterias, and other areas requiring mobility. Ensure that egress and mobility are accessible for students with disabilities.
- No large group activities (i.e. assemblies.).
- Protocols are needed for persons entering the school. All persons must wear PPE. Determine process for how adherence to protocols will be monitored.
- Keep internal doors in rooms open to decrease physical contact, except doors having locking systems where alarms will ring if they are open for too long.
- Keep playgrounds closed.
- Rethink the use of lockers as personal storage spaces. A goal for the reopening of schools should be to minimize materials/spaces needing cleaning.
- Visitors should not be allowed into school and schools should not be used by outside groups.
- Fire and lock down drills need to be reduced and postponed until COVID-19 data and testing indicates low level risk for such compliance-oriented regulations.

Issues Related to Transportation

- Spacing and staggered times for students entering the building will need to be considered.

- Transportation routes must ensure that students do not spend excessive time on buses resulting in instructional loss.
- Consider having one area for school arrival and another for dismissal.
- Consider a separate entrance for students who walk to school.
- Put in place procedures to account for parental drop offs and student cars.
- Consider taking temperature checks on buses as opposed to at the school entrance.

Issues Related to Classrooms/Groups

- Develop backup plans for hiring substitutes. Develop a regional pool of candidates to include; perhaps students not returning to college and retirees.
- Consider the use of:
 - Two half-day sessions daily
 - A/B schedules
 - Alternate weekly/virtual learning
 - Streaming live classroom instruction
 - The use of auditoriums for large class lecture type instruction
- Consider the use of block scheduling, which provides longer instructional time on fewer days.
- For classrooms that use tables or work stations as opposed to desks, the use of separators will be needed.
- Use partitions to separate students who work in lab areas.
- Move desks into rows facing in one direction.
- Small groups will impact the number of staff needed, if small groups are to be adhered to all day.

- Consider teacher rotation into classrooms as opposed to students moving between rooms.

Issues Related to Food Service

- If lunchrooms are not useable (as some schools may need the space for instruction), then students must eat in their classrooms. Cleaning the lunchrooms after each lunch period may not be feasible.
- There may be a need to move to brown bag lunches, which impacts the need for hot lunches.
- The cafeteria plan will need to accommodate instructional schedules.
- Consider school district support for families and children who relied on meals provided during the school closure. Families will still have the same level of need even though the students are in school. The staff and resources that the school had will now revert to what is needed for daily operations.

Academics/Instruction Reopening Considerations

The SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group found that any scenario for reopening schools will result in an overall decrease in instructional time. Each day will be impacted by time needed for daily health and safety protocols, increased numbers of bus routes, delayed or staggered start times, a period of reorientation during the initial weeks of reopening, and needed scheduling breaks from wearing masks and other PPE requirements.

The most likely scenario for reopening schools will be a hybrid model using both in-class and remote learning. This model will require relief from many mandates, with an overall recommendation for a moratorium on many state

requirements for the 2020-21 “bridge year.” The following considerations have been discussed for the reopening of schools in the school year 2020-21.

Issues related to curriculum

- Schools/ grade levels will determine the curriculum standards and instruction they did not get to while schools were closed.
- Spiral the curriculum of March 2020 – June 2020 into the 2020-2021 year.
- Consider looping teachers with their former students for the 2020-21 school year to enhance continuity of learning.
- Live stream classroom lessons so that students who are located at home have access to the day’s instruction.
- Delimit instruction to super-standards and core curriculum. This may require reducing course load (number of required credits) in high school.
- A resocialization and orientation process period should be allocated during the first weeks of reopening to support student and staff readjustment.
- BOCES and school districts will need to coordinate planning for students receiving instruction at BOCES.
- Any extracurricular activities must be limited to activities that meet DOH guidelines.

Issues related to assessing learning loss

- Consider conducting virtual end-of-year or virtual summer student conferences to obtain baseline information on where to start in the fall.
- Consider allocating focused time at the beginning of reopening to concentrate on assessing learning loss and providing focused intervention

classes to mitigate loss. A consequence of this decision will be a loss of instructional time needed to move students forward for the next grade level learning expectations. Some districts are considering creative grouping to allow students to better pace their progress and not remain in static groups.

- Due to exemption from New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Tests (NYSESLAT), districts do not have new proficiency levels for ELL students. Districts will need flexibility to conduct progress monitoring for students with English learning needs to better determine actual levels rather than maintain springtime levels.

Social-Emotional/ Mental Health Reopening Considerations

The mental health wellness of students and staff is a high priority as schools look toward reopening. The SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group has a keen awareness that the lived experience during the COVID-19 crisis was highly varied and personal. Many experiences were tragic and trauma producing and most students and staff experienced anxiety and high levels of uncertainty. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis is now inextricably intertwined with civil unrest, which will require building administrators and program leaders to understand and work with the community on addressing the complexities of racial inequities. As schools close out the 2019-20 school year and prepare for the 2020-21 school year, schools will need to be “trauma informed and trauma skilled” and embed social-emotional learning throughout the practiced curriculum (AASA COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, June 2020). To be successful in this domain, schools will need to reestablish, strengthen, and maintain trust with students, staff, families and the surrounding community. Building administrators should be cognizant of the

important role they have in their communities. A recent study by the PEW Foundation found that principals are one of the most trusted persons in their community and ranked above clergy, military, and police enforcement (Pew Research Center, 2018). The trust that principals have established will be necessary to assure parents, staff, and students that reopening plans have student health, safety, and mental wellness as their highest priority.

The following considerations for the social/emotional and mental health wellness for reopening are a result of the work to the SAANYS Reopening Schools Focus Group:

Issues Related to Meeting the Social-Emotional Needs of Students

Communication

- Establish trust with adults in the school community, understanding that students react to adult responses. It is imperative that the adults interacting with students trust that the school is prepared to ensure the health and wellness of the entire school community upon opening.
- Invite community and stakeholder input during the planning process for reopening schools.
- Ensure that all communication is transparent and consistent. Advertise upcoming public discussions and meetings on reopening and post in common language guidelines and policies related to reopening schools.
- Ensure that student voice is prominent. Involve students in the planning, discussions, and implementation phases of reopening. Develop and disseminate student surveys.

Identification

- Establish baseline information on student social-emotional needs. A wide range of strategies were discussed including:
 - Conducting an ACES (adverse childhood experiences) type of assessments on students. This may be accomplished by focusing on students known to be at risk throughout the school closure period or students with whom the school has had limited engagement.
 - Check-ins with all students should occur. The experiences of all students during the COVID-19 shutdown are unknown and will present differently. It should not be assumed that students who in the past have not presented with observable anxieties or at-risk behaviors will follow a similar trajectory during their pandemic and civil unrest experiences.

Interventions

- Establish tiered intervention strategies for supporting the mental wellness needs of students.
- Establish strong ties with community resources for mental health services. Some districts have established community school models, while others have expanded collaborations with their county department of health.
- Consider the provision of mental health supports during the summer months for students.
- Consider establishing extended classes during the week to conduct student discussion and support groups. Programs such as CPR (Circle of Power and Respect) are currently being conducted in some districts. Invite parents and staff to attend discussions.

- Consider a designated period of time at the beginning of a reopening phase for student debriefing, orientation, and discussions only. This approach will emphasize social and emotional needs, with instructional time being gradually phased in.
- Consider the use of a technology/ curriculum taskforce to address how social-emotional standards could be embedded in instruction. Some districts used the initial phases of school closures to focus on the social-emotional domains, with teachers using videos to enhance personal relationship building.
- Addressing student mental health needs may be met effectively through tele-conferences and tele-consultation.
- Consider how to realign and restructure pupil personnel staff to address the social and emotional needs of the school community.

Issues related to social unrest and racial inequities

- Provide professional learning for teachers and the school community prior to schools reopening. Develop reading materials and online discussion groups to gain increased understandings of racial inequity and strategies for conducting classroom discussions and projects.
- Provide staff training on appropriate cultural responses and knowledge regarding multiple perspectives and strategies to understand how culture informs student perceptions and actions.
- Provide sufficient and adequate time for professional development so that staff are prepared to identify how trauma and mental health needs present in students – leading to a better understanding of the impact on student learning and to build student resilience.

- Embed student engagement and positive social interaction through project- and experienced-based, leaning activities.
- Determine how social emotional standards will be addressed as the district determines the scope of curriculum during the 2020-21 school year. As instructional time may be reduced and limited, it will be important to understand where and how social emotional learning will take place.

Recommendations

- Suspend requirements for school days and school year for state aid purposes for a period of one year. Consider the 2020-21 school year as a “bridge year” that allows districts the opportunity to construct an educational program that adjusts to the demands for meeting student and staff health needs, while moving instruction forward. District plans should specify the instructional program as to daily and weekly instructional hours and modified school calendars, ensuring equity for all students.
- Provide relief from attendance mandates. For the 2020-21 school year, lift mandatory attendance for at least the first semester until parental decisions are known and COVID-19 metrics can be examined.
- Eliminate state assessments for the 2020-21 school year. Curriculum variation will vary district to district. If state assessments are not eliminated, at a minimum, provide relief from lab requirements, as needed for Regents examinations. The curriculum for 2020-21 will need to be based, in part, on what was not covered in 2019-20, which will vary district to district. No state assessment will be able to adjust for such variation and SED will not have the capacity to develop a reliable and valid state assessment in time for a late spring implementation.

- Eliminate traditional grading policies for one year and base grading on standards- based proficiency.
- Provide regulatory flexibility for physical education and adaptive PE.
- Allow school nurses to conduct COVID-19 testing.
- Suspend emergency drills of all types for one year or minimize number needed.
- Advocate for the removal of the 2% tax cap. Districts cannot afford the costs related to re-opening.
- Should districts determine that they will reopen school using both in-person and online instruction, then critical infrastructure for distance learning will be needed. Students must have access to the Internet, appropriate software, and devices. Funding to ensure access to devices and Internet is critical if schools open using a hybrid strategy or should school closures occur due to increased COVID-19 cases.
- Advocate for increased state aid funding for costs incurred due to COVID-19 related expenses. Increase smart schools bonding grants or no-cost loans for the infrastructure needed for Internet access and technology needed to support distance learning.
- Advocate for increased funding for increased transportation needs (buses, gasoline, maintenance) and additional transportation staff needed due to increased bus runs to accommodate social distancing and other health/ safety protocols.

Conclusion

The reopening of schools presents serious challenges and opportunities for educators. The need to identify priorities while remaining flexible will be critical. During school closures, educators have proven to have the capacity to meet many serious challenges. During the COVID-19 crisis we have seen schools take on expanded and reinvented roles. Educators will once again be frontline workers and will need high levels of support as they manage reopening and take on new roles and responsibilities. It is imperative that students and staff remain healthy and safe and that students are provided a high- quality education at the same time. Accomplishing this monumental task will require clear and articulated support from governing agencies. It is important that the governor and the state education department work in a coordinate fashion to ensure support to educators across this state. Extraordinary statutory and regulatory requirements will need to be suspended, fiscal support must stay at the highest level possible, and policymakers will need to continually monitor the effectiveness of health and education systems.

Appendix A

NAME	TITLE	SCHOOL
CHAIR - Felicia Thomas-Williams Linda Klime	Principal Business Administration	Brentwood Union Free School District at West Middle School Lansingburgh Central School District
Francine Leggett Dustin Relation Jenn McDonald Chris Sanita Dr. Alison Clark	Principal Principal Principal Principal Principal	Schlegel Road Elementary School Malone Middle School Mount Markham Elementary School Pine Bush Elementary School Stratford Elementary School - Plainview-Old Bethpage School District
Anthony Cardamone	Director of Elementary Curriculum	Baldwinsville Central School District
Jennifer Drautz Michael Plotkin Dr. Nathan Work Coretta Bridges Dr. Paul Fanuele	Principal Principal Principal Principal Executive Principal	Voorheesville Middle School Croton-on-Hudson School District Pembroke Junior/Senior High School School Without Walls - Rochester City School District Arlington High School in the Arlington Central School District
Dr. Mark Pitterson Christopher Richardt Curt Juengerkes	Principal Principal Assistant Principal	Berne Knox Westerlo Central School District Hampton Bays High School Islip High School
David Richardson	Executive Director of Student Operations	Greece Central School District
Dr. Gregory Brown	Assistant Director of Curriculum & Instruction	Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES
Richard DeLisle	Director of Technology	Baldwinsville Central School District
Sarah Cioffi	Academic Administrator for World Languages and English as a New Language	Shenendehowa Central School District
Dr. Joyce Carr	Supervisor of Special Education and Student Support Services	Elmira City School District
Kevin Hulbert	Executive Principal of Athletics, Pre-K Education and Curriculum	Ausable Valley Central School District