What are School Health Priorities and Needs for Reopening?

A report by
**University of California, Nutrition Policy Institute,
the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Kaiser Permanente**

July 2020

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources**

Nutrition Policy Institute
Research for healthy food, people and places

ALLIANCE FOR A
**HEALTHIER
GENERATION**

KAISER PERMANENTE®

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 health crisis rapidly expanded in the United States beginning in the first quarter of 2020. It caused widespread disruption across the country as people sheltered-in-place and schools and businesses closed. In April 2020, Kaiser Permanente convened a multi-disciplinary work group of seven national organizations to develop practical guidance for schools and districts when they return to the classroom. Recognizing the need to hear from those most directly impacted, from late April to early June Kaiser Permanente, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (Healthier Generation) and school health partners developed and administered surveys and interviews to understand anticipated school health challenges, needs and priorities for schools in Fall 2020.

This paper describes the findings from both the survey and interviews, including the health challenges that are anticipated in the coming school year and resources needed to promote the physical and social-emotional health of the school community. It also includes reflections on the unexpected benefits or "silver linings" of the extensive disruption, rapid adaptations and changes experienced in spring 2020. We conclude with key takeaways and a description of the **Planning for the Next Normal at School Playbook**, a resource for all schools to begin to address the critical health needs identified. *Access the full Playbook here:* https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/get-inspired/coronavirus-response/schools-reopening-playbook/

METHODS

Online Survey

By the end of March 2020, school operations nationwide had either been suspended or shifted to distance education/virtual learning. A 16-question survey of school stakeholders was developed by Healthier Generation and Kaiser Permanente to determine what priorities and needs for physical and social-emotional health are anticipated for school re-opening in Fall of 2020. The close-ended questions on the survey were designed to test assumptions that Healthier Generation and Kaiser Permanente anticipated schools would need. An email invitation and link to an online survey (via Survey Monkey) were broadly distributed by Healthier Generation, Kaiser Permanente, Healthy Schools Campaign and Action for Healthy Kids to a network of school stakeholders from April 27 through May 26, 2020. Frequencies were produced on all the close-ended questions. There were no substantial differences in the responses by demographic characteristics of the respondents. *Participants:* A total of 876 people responded to the survey. Data from 777 respondents who completed the majority of the survey were included in the analysis. Respondents were from 44 states with over 50% from two states: California and Georgia. Most respondents worked in schools (81%), at the elementary level (55%) and in an urban setting (48%). Respondents represented a variety of roles within a school or district: instructional staff (45%), student services (18%), school/district administrators (17%) and non-instructional staff (16%).

School/District Interviews and Participants

School/District interviews were conducted to expand on trends found in the survey and understand in more detail what school and district staff will need when schools reopen. Phone interviews were conducted by staff from Healthier Generation between May 22 and June 4, 2020 with 16 school and school district staff, about half of whom had responded to the survey and had agreed to be contacted, and half of whom were known by Healthier Generation staff and reachable during school closures. Responses were coded by emergent themes and rank-ordered for each question. *Participants:* Respondents included 4 principals, 4 behavioral/mental health/mindfulness staff, 3 wellness teacher/coordinators, 3 student/community services staff and 2 teachers.

Organizational Key Informant Interviews and Participants

In addition, 13 key informant interviews were conducted to learn what national school health experts from organizations that support school health view as the top health issues and needs when schools reopen. Phone interviews were conducted by staff from Kaiser Permanente, Healthier Generation and the Healthy Schools Campaign between May 8-20, 2020, with representatives from 13 organizations that support or inform school and district staff about health. Responses were coded by emergent themes and rank-ordered for each question. *Participants:* Nearly half of the respondents held health and wellness roles in their organizations. The other respondents focused on unions, human resources/benefits, student attendance, food security, physical activity or mental health issues. (See the Appendix for list of respondent organizations.)

The questions asked in both the School/District and Organizational interviews focused on needs and priorities for school reopening but were asked in different ways, tailored to the respondents. However, themes that emerged from both surveys were not substantively different.

OVERVIEW

The survey and interviews examined reopening challenges and needs of the whole school community—students, staff and families—in the areas of physical health and social-emotional health.
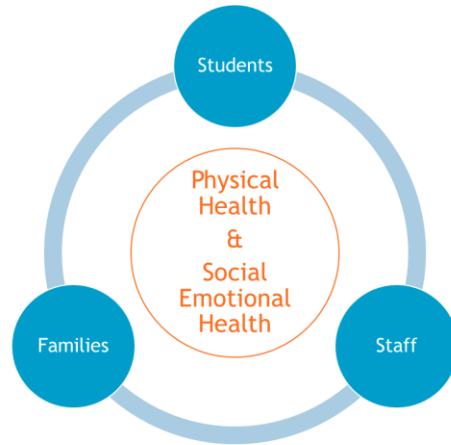
Overall findings from the survey and interviews indicate that the primary challenge anticipated for school reopening will be addressing safety and infection control related to COVID-19.

Top physical health priorities for school reopening include infection control and meeting basic needs like food, housing and clothing.

Top social-emotional health priorities for school reopening include helping staff and students process emotions and build relationships.

Discussing these priorities raised concerns about having sufficient staff and budget to address the needs.
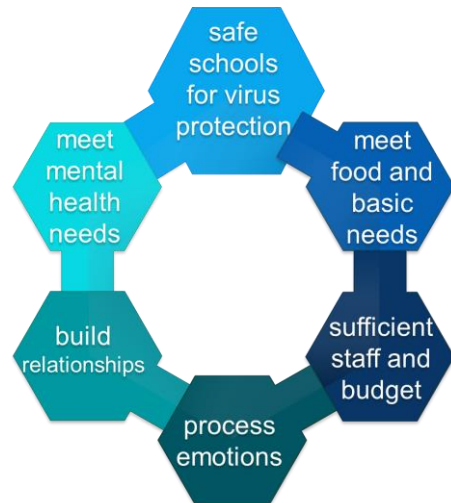
CHALLENGES

When asked what the greatest health-related challenges would be when schools reopen, a large majority of survey and interview respondents expressed concern about schools' capacity to prevent the spread of COVID-19 when students and staff return to the classroom setting. Respondents were concerned about having adequate space, materials and information to ensure infection control. (Table 1) In addition, many interview respondents mentioned that schools will need the right staff and sufficient budget to adapt to this challenge at both the school and district levels.

Table 1: When schools reopen, what are your top 3 health related challenges? (online survey)

Top Ranked Health Challenges – INFECTION CONTROL
1. Limited physical space or facilities in schools for distancing (needed for COVID suppression) (85%)
2. Lack of materials for proper health practices (hand washing stations, cleaning supplies, etc.) (56%)
3. Lack of information on proper health practices (e.g. hygiene, minimize contact, etc.) (46%)
Other Health Challenges – RECOVERING FROM ISOLATION
4. Lack of time to focus on health priorities (in preparing to reopen) (40%)
5. Difficulty in connecting with or engaging families for health-related efforts (37%)
6. Lack of knowledge among staff on how to design/implement health curriculum/initiatives (21%)

Source: online survey, n=777

Online Survey Respondents:

My biggest concern is how are we going to be able to control social distancing with so many students in a confined place. I live in a suburban area with a good amount of space, and some people still don't know how to remain distanced.

…We need $$ for materials, portables to create smaller work spaces, and people to help support smaller working/play groups.

CONTROLLING INFECTION

School/district interview respondents mentioned infection control most often when asked how to support health when schools resume in-person instruction. Specifically, concerns included social distancing, screening, access to accurate information and considerations for high-risk staff and students.

> *Direction from the district about how we should social distance in the building. Training for teachers during pre-planning and teachers to train students during first week of school.*

> *…concerned that keeping facilities functioning and clean is super important and needs to be addressed now. This rises to the top since school does a good job with social-emotional practices…already see a problem with the low supplies now.*

When asked what the main physical health issues are for students, staff and families, organizational interview respondents also discussed concerns about infection control and basic health checks.

> *Students with underlying conditions and can they return in the same timeline as 'healthy' students. If students are identified in the school day, how can they be quarantined? Also teachers who are in at-risk populations - how will they be able to staff.*

> *…we have concerns that kids are not going to be receiving their regularly scheduled well child visits and immunizations for fear of going to the doctor's office - do you end up with a measles outbreak on top of everything else? Do you miss diagnosing other health issues?*

HAVING SUFFICIENT RESOURCES

Organizational interview respondents mentioned concerns about schools not having sufficient resources to respond to these challenges. For example, they mentioned concerns about potentially lower enrollment affecting school budgets and the need for more nursing and mental health staff.

> *The school closures have brought to light the inequities in education and health we already knew existed and we only expect those to get worse in the coming year as school budgets are decimated by the pandemic.*

> *Major concerns around cuts to Medicaid and school mental health staffing - how that will correspond to worsening identification and intervention response…economic effects, budget cuts of at least 10%, up to 15% reduction in spending…*

PRIORITIES AND NEEDS

Survey respondents were asked to choose their top 3 priorities from a list of needs schools and districts may have when schools reopen. Interview respondents were asked open-ended questions about anticipated needs. Both sets of respondents were asked to consider the needs of students, staff and families in two main areas: physical health and social-emotional health.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

The primary concerns and needs identified consistently across the survey and interviews were safety, hygiene and COVID-19 infection control on campus once schools resume in-person instruction. Respondents expressed a need for a safe school environment and policies to protect them, combined with clear instruction on how to implement public health guidance as school re-open. People also expressed concerns about the insufficiency of various resources (physical, monetary and personnel) to support school reopening.

Table 2. When schools reopen, what are the top 3 elements you need to have in place to support the physical health of students, staff and families? (online survey)

For Students	For School Staff	For Families
Top-Ranked Priorities – INFECTION CONTROL		
1. **Safe environments** for school meals, instructional time and recess[1] (81%)	1. **Safe environments** for common staff areas [1] (93%)	1. **Instruction in best practices to create a safe home environment**[4] (85%)
2. **Instruction in public health best practices**[2] (50%)	2. **Instruction in public health best practices**[2] (83%)	2. **Resources to support physical activity / healthy eating at home / school** (74%)
3. Increase in **school nurses** (35%)	3. **Signage to promote public health** guidelines in school environment[3] (61%)	3. **Support for applying for school meals and other safety net programs** (56%)

Source: online survey, n=777

[1] physical distancing, sanitation and other practices based on public health guidelines
[2] hand washing, physical distancing, integrating safe disinfectant techniques into the classroom, etc.
[3] reminders about hand washing/ sanitizing before consuming foods & beverages
[4] properly using chemicals to disinfect the home, clothing and school mater

Online Survey Respondent:

Super scared about how to stay safe when students return since as a teacher I am stuck in the room all day and with only 4 minutes between classes how can we be sure it is clean.

NEED INFECTION CONTROL FOR STUDENT, STAFF AND FAMILIES
School/district interview respondents identified concerns about how to care for the safety of *both* students and staff. A third of the responses identified infection control as the main issue. Infection control included social distancing, screening, access to accurate information and considerations for high-risk staff and students.

Really important that we focus on safety above what we are going to instinctively or traditionally want to go back to.

Main thing is safety. Making sure that schools are abiding by recommendations of health officials.

Direction from the district about how we should social distance in the building. Training for teachers during pre-planning and teachers to train students during first week of school. Something around highly touched surfaces.

MEET BASIC NEEDS FOR STUDENT, STAFF AND FAMILIES
Organizational interview questions asked about social health supports that might be needed. Most responses were in the area of safety, well checks, basic needs and food security. Nearly a third of the responses identified basic resource needs. The next most common response area concerned food safety and food distribution.

Community school strategy is the right one, but it means that when they close, the laundry, backpacks with food, etc. means that goes away when school goes away.

… food at the top of requests, then the next big wave of needs will be stable housing/rent issues.

…school meal deliveries, has been some partnering with other food delivery services, make sure recommend in this section those stay in place.

NEED MORE STAFF RESOURCES
Organizational interview questions asked about what infrastructure supports for health might be needed. Most responses noted the need for specialized staff such as nurses, specialized instructional support and mental health.

Need nurses at every school to help with screening.

Need more specialized instructional support providers in schools…secure spots for more school nurses. They are essential and in 2020 schools are the primary pediatric health provider in this country and we don't have the workers to support that. Not in clinical, telehealth, etc. settings. …Need more [mental health] people on all fronts.

SUPPORTS NEEDED FOR SCHOOL MEAL AND SUPPLEMENTAL FOOD

SCHOOL/DISTRICT INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS WERE SPECIFICALLY ASKED WHAT IS NEEDED TO PRIORITIZE AND EXPAND SUPPORT FOR ONE OF THE MOST BASIC NEEDS FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES: MEALS AND FOOD SUPPORT. MOST RESPONDENTS (88%) AGREED THIS IS IMPORTANT. THEY SUGGESTED EXPANSION AND ADDITIONAL WAYS TO DISTRIBUTE FOOD TO FAMILIES IN NEED. A FEW RESPONDENTS THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE DOING A GOOD JOB WITH FOOD SUPPORT.

YES! Our YMCA is utilizing federal funds to provide grab and go meals at all of our school locations during the school dismissal.   I would like to see this continue when school reopens to include supper available at all schools for all students that need it.

…With our supplemental food programs we are reaching many students - but still not reaching all that need it. This has been a real challenge.

Maybe a catering truck going into neighborhoods and kids getting food that way - if kids cannot come to us we need to go to them.

If we are in distance learning, how will students receive meals? We could provide gift cards to families in need.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Across the survey and interviews, social emotional health priorities included creating opportunities for relationship building, having time for everyone in the school community to process emotions, ensuring sufficient mental health supports and having enough appropriate support staff.

Table 3. When schools reopen, what are the top 3 elements you need to have in place to support the social-emotional health of students, staff and families? (online survey)

For Students	For School Staff	For Families
Top-Ranked Priorities – PROCESS EMOTIONS		
1. **Opportunities to process emotions** related to COVID and return to school (51%)	1. **'Soft start' to prioritize relationship building** over academic recovery (59%)	1. **Access to student support staff to support** back to school (58%)
2. **Increase in school staff** (psychologist, counselor, social worker, nurse) (44%)	2. **Staff voice is included in planning** (47%)	2. **Resources to help their children re-adjust** back to school (54%)
3. **Strategies to mitigate trauma response** to quarantine[1] (43%)	3. **Opportunities to process emotions** related to COVID and return to school (43%)	3. **Referral pathway needing community supports** (50%)

Source: online survey, n=777

[1] managing triggers, resources for those who lost someone close to them due to COVID or had/have very ill family members, etc.

Online Survey Respondents:

… mental health systems were already overloaded before COVID and intake at the beginning of the year takes too long to begin services for students who have critical mental health needs.

Due to the pandemic, the value of daily exercise for health reasons and managing mood may increase.

PROCESS EMOTIONS FOR STUDENT, STAFF AND FAMILY
Coping with change and repercussions from shelter-in-place orders to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus has been difficult. Respondents from school/district interviews who were asked about priorities when schools reopen frequently mentioned the need for addressing the social-emotional needs of both students and staff, such as dealing with potential trauma, reengaging in the classroom, building relationships, processing emotions and allocating enough time to do so.

People are grieving a loss to the core practices of human interaction of our society. Staff and students have suffered losses and they haven't had the structures to grief: hugs, funerals, outpouring of love - most challenging aspect. We are at a loss for how to interact with each other.

A lot of staff would like mental and emotional support for children and staff, especially those who've been personally affected by COVID.

We have experienced so much trauma in the last few months and schools need to recognize that intentional support and strategies to address self-care, managing emotions and reestablishing connection are the most important things we can do for our school communities.

I definitely agree and I think there needs to be once we come back together, a plan for a few weeks of non-focused instruction and it is just processing.

Uniform teaching, providing facts to all students, addressing fears and emotions, allowing students to talk and share. WITHOUT adding another class- the COVID19 class, perhaps adding a 10-minute lesson into a class each day to address.

Possibly group sessions where students can share their feelings and teacher trainings on how to effectively deal with children affected by COVID.

TRAINING AND REFERRAL FOR STUDENT, STAFF AND FAMILY

School/district interview respondents mentioned the need for training and referral resources for students, staff and families to process emotions. Examples include equipping teachers to deal with potential trauma, referral resources for bereavement and mental health support and tips for parents to reduce their anxiety.

…How do we support and train teachers how to help (not being trained as mental health providers) otherwise secondary trauma will be overwhelming. We need to start thinking about this now and strategizing. Students need this more than ever.

Reassure parents – kids have been doing school activities like this throughout the year, let them try it out before you step in. Providing tips to allow parents to be less anxious about school work.

...mental health and bereavement supports if they needed assistance…What should principal role be in communicating those resources? One person lost three family members in the same week…

STAFFING RESOURCES

School/district interview respondents frequently mentioned the need for mental health specialist support staff and assistance with social emotional supports.

School counselors, psychologists, administrators, teachers and nurses will play an important role in recognizing and providing additional support via formal counseling, SE lessons and being present and supportive.

She [school counselor] reaches out to staff members on a personal level to see how they are doing. She is 1 person, over 1000 students. Helpful for someone/professional counselor outside to talk with them and provide support.

Would love to know that a teacher could reach out when they need a break and someone would step up - a partner teacher. Teachers could also take time to visit the counselor as well.

Organization interview participants were asked about the emotional or mental health issues that may arise. Many were concerned about school budgets and the ability to provide mental health services.

…Schools are going to be faced with incredibly hard decisions regarding letting staff go and our concern is that school health providers will be some of the first to go.

Major concerns around cuts to Medicaid and school MH staffing - how that will correspond to worsening identification and intervention response.

…it would entail teachers focusing a little more on building relationships, trust and a positive environment in the classroom.

SUPPORTS NEEDED FOR A "SOFT START" TO SCHOOL

SCHOOL/DISTRICT INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS WERE SPECIFICALLY ASKED ABOUT A "SOFT START" WHEN SCHOOL REOPENS TO ENSURE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING. MOST RESPONDENTS (88%) AGREED THIS IS IMPORTANT, ALTHOUGH A FEW WERE NOT SURE AND EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMICS.

Relationships are so important to academics and we know that kids learn best when they have a trusting adult in their life.

… have morning meetings to address the conversations—asking the questions to dig deeper into what they are feeling. Asking where they could grow during this…not just negative.

… Some relationship things are organically happening through ritual and routines. I do think we need to have a strong message that we're here for academics first.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

While the survey and interviews focused primarily on anticipated needs of schools and districts upon returning to school for in-person learning, all respondents were asked about any "silver linings" or unexpected benefits that may have arisen as a result of shelter-in-place orders and subsequent changes and adaptations schools enacted in response. The purpose of this question was to understand educational needs from a different direction. Previous questions focused on identifying needs based on a perceived *gap* between the respondent's current state and an ideal return-to-work state. However, this question aimed to identify needs by asking respondents to reflect on a need that was *fulfilled* because of the forced changes to the education landscape. This is important because it highlights an opportunity for schools and districts to develop reopening plans that *preserve* these benefits while filling other gaps. It also presents an opportunity for education leaders to reflect on lessons learned and advocate for forward thinking policies and practices.

A large majority of respondents mentioned a "silver lining" outcome from the school closures. They expressed hope that the future will be shaped in new ways:

- A greater recognition of the importance of health to learning and more attention to addressing the whole child:

  This pandemic has made the education sector come full circle with how health / basic needs impact learning. This is an opportunity to restructure our systems to address that. If we don't we will be leaving behind massive amounts of kids.

  There will be a greater awareness of the importance of student's basic needs before they can engage in academic studies…

- An appreciation of technology as a useful tool for student engagement and academic success:

  The silver lining is the deep dive we have done into technology. Learning about technology is giving us so many options and helpful tools that I can use for my students. I've been surprised to find that I really like the online platform.

- An understanding of the need for a greater focus on educator well-being as a way to sustain the workforce moving forward:

  In the long run, I wonder if teachers and staff will be able to de-stress more and take care of their needs once we become used to learning/working at home. We are needing to change perspectives on treating ourselves with more compassion.

CONCLUSION

In April-June 2020, during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, district and school staff and national health leaders from organizations who focus on health in schools reflected on the health needs and challenges that school communities will face when they reopen for in-person instruction. Controlling the risk of viral infection and adapting the on-campus school environment to meet infection control best practices are the primary concerns. Top physical health needs are ensuring a safe environment and meeting basic needs when schools reopen. Top social-emotional health needs are processing emotions and building relationships when schools reopen. Finally, respondents indicated several experiences that should be preserved as part of reopening: a focus on whole-child health, use of technology, and an explicit focus on educator well-being.

Informed by crucial needs identified in the surveys and interviews, Kaiser Permanente partnered with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and over 30 additional trusted school health organizations to create **Planning for the Next Normal at School Playbook**. This resource for schools and districts provides practical strategies/actionable guidance, in the form of five "starter" plays per chapter, addressing COVID-19 prevention, mental health and well-being, social drivers of health, physical activity and physical education and teacher and staff well-being. The Playbook is applicable for schools that are virtual, in-person, or a hybrid, and includes a focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Access the full Playbook here: https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/get-inspired/coronavirus-response/schools-reopening-playbook/

APPENDIX

Key Informant Interviews were conducted with respondents from these organizations

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
ABC Federation of Teachers, Local 2317 (ABCFT)
American Federation of Teachers
Attendance Works
National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
National Center for School Mental Health
North Clackamas School District
Orange County Department of Education
South Kitsap School District
University of California Berkeley School of Public Health
University of California Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI)
Washington Education Association
Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence