



March 24, 2021

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT K-12 School Reopenings

PRO POINTS

- **President Joe Biden has committed to reopening the majority of the nation's schools teaching K-8 for in-person instruction by May 1, 2021.** However, the federal government has limited authority to direct state and local decisions about when to open their classrooms.
- **Congress approved \$122.7 billion to help get classes back in session as part of a \$1.9 trillion aid package signed in March 2021.** Local education agencies are required to spend some of the money on learning loss, afterschool and summer programs. Lawmakers reserved \$800 million to identify homeless children and provide them with "wrap-around services" and assistance that will help them fully participate in school.
- **Biden is under pressure from student loan borrowers and testing critics to unravel several policies put in place under former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, but the top priority for his secretary, Miguel Cardona, is to see schools reopen to in-person instruction.** Cardona has also urged states to prioritize educators for vaccinations.
- **The Education Department launched a national survey to better understand the status of in-person learning at the nation's schools.** But many schools across the country are already open, even though CDC guidance suggests much of the country should proceed with caution.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Covid-19 touched off a public health crisis in March 2020 that threw the American school system into a year of rolling crises. Federal and local governments were divided on how to teach K-12 students while families and educators struggled to navigate sometimes conflicting opinions and evolving research about the disease's transmission. Central to fully reopening the economy, President Joe Biden has put school reopening at the center of his agenda and deployed first lady Jill Biden, an educator herself, to play up the \$1.9 trillion relief law. There's plenty at stake.

The scientific consensus by the spring of 2021 found that schools can safely reopen classrooms to younger learners if a variety of safeguards are in place, including mask-wearing and social distancing. Consecutive semesters of upended instruction time have prompted serious concerns about students' mental health and academic achievement. The sharp pivot to online learning also exacerbated a digital divide that put a spotlight on students' access to technology and broadband connectivity. Researchers and educators worry the disruption of in-person education will have disproportionate impacts on students who are disabled, impoverished or live in rural areas. Congress has approved a trio of federal stimulus packages since the pandemic took hold, including Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act. Educators have received vaccination priority in almost every state, and Biden has ordered a pharmacy program to give greater preference to school staff and childcare workers during the month of March. Recent guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on school reopening offered detailed instructions for local leaders, but still invited criticism. Teachers' unions and local governments have sparred over safety protocols and reopening plans, while a number of state officials and lawmakers wrangle over their own efforts to prod schools to reopen this spring.



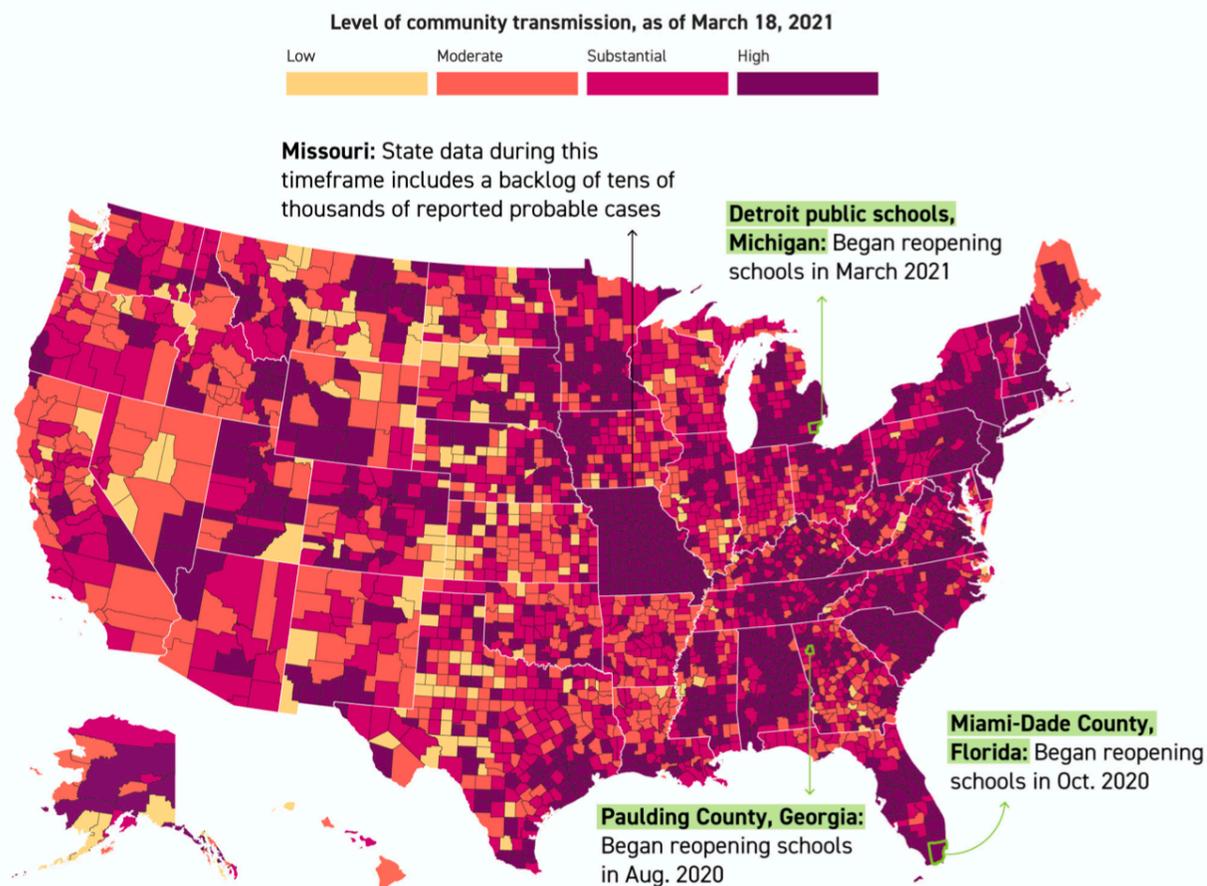
39 percent of counties reported high rates of community transmission

A year out from March 2020 — when the majority of students shifted from in-person to remote learning — there is a lot more clarity about how Covid-19 spreads, who is most at risk for serious symptoms and how to slow transmission of the disease. Many school districts, including New York City, chose to open for in-person classes by the fall of 2020 despite high local positivity rates. A year after most schoolchildren were sent home, local education officials — not the federal government — are left to decide whether to reopen classrooms in 2021.

Despite high rates, some schools may choose to reopen, as did the three counties highlighted below in Michigan, Georgia and Florida.

Another variable to consider when looking at the CDC's data is the timing of when information is logged with the agency. In Missouri, for instance, almost every county is listed as a 'high transmission' state because the state data for this timeframe included a backlog of tens of thousands of reported probable cases.

Still, the CDC suggests that K-12 schools be the first to reopen when they can do so safely. It also recommends these are the last to close. In-person instruction should also be prioritized over extracurricular activities, the CDC says, including sports and school events, to minimize the risk of transmission.



WHAT'S NEXT

Biden has committed to having most K-8 classrooms open to five days of weekly in-person instruction by May 1 and signed a \$1.9 trillion pandemic aid package directing more than \$122.7 billion to elementary and secondary school education relief — a vast sum to track and deploy across the nation's patchwork system of school districts. Local education agencies are directed to use roughly a fifth of their relief money to address pandemic-era



learning loss, including summer and afterschool programs. The Education Department has published data showing how much money each state is getting for K-12 relief from the Covid aid law. While states have steadily ramped up their vaccination programs, shots have not yet been developed for children, leaving young people to be among the last in the country to be inoculated. States also have to plan how they'll administer standardized tests after the White House declined to extend past waivers for the exams this year. And schools expect to face challenges establishing how testing programs for the virus itself will operate. Colleges and universities have set up effective Covid-19 surveillance efforts across the country, but K-12 schools face different sets of hurdles to scan students and staff for infections.

What's the right amount of physical distancing?

Early CDC guidance encouraged schools to promote physical distancing of at least six feet and to require universal mask use, saying they were the two top ways to reduce the transmission of Covid-19 among students and school staff. But the government's recommendations have evolved with new research: In March 2021, the agency said three feet of physical distancing between students in classrooms is acceptable in most cases, with six feet of distancing in certain circumstances.

Three feet versus six feet

Data from a 16-week study of 251 school districts in Massachusetts showed no substantial difference in Covid-19 cases between those that used three feet versus six feet of social distancing while using masks. Less restrictive social distancing policies can help schools accommodate more students and staff that may not have the physical infrastructure to bring all their children back into classrooms. The study, which was published in March 2021, was led by physicians at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

Six feet still preferred in some cases

The CDC suggests maintaining six feet of distance between teachers and staff, and between adults and students at all times. That distance is still recommended for common areas such as lobbies and auditoriums, when students are eating, and during activities that require increased exertion such as gym class, choir or band practice.

The agency also suggests middle school and high school students stay six feet apart in communities where test positivity rates are 10 percent or higher and cohorting — when groups of students are kept together with the same staff throughout the day — is not available.

Other distancing methods

When optimal physical distancing isn't possible, the CDC suggests schools group students into smaller "pods" that stay together through the day as much as possible to improve the tracing process and minimize how much of the school shuts down when cases are detected. Schools, the CDC says, should also consider staggering student arrival and drop-off times for pods.



POWER PLAYERS

- **Miguel Cardona:** The former Connecticut schools official was confirmed on a bipartisan vote as U.S. Education secretary in early March and started his career as an elementary school teacher and administrator. He's previewed a broad agenda, but acknowledged Covid-19 has wrenched open long-standing disparities in the nation's schools, exposing many problems that will persist for years. Reopening schools while navigating tense relationships with Capitol Hill, educators and the White House will likely define his tenure.
- **Rochelle Walensky:** The CDC chief leads the nation's flagship public health agency and is a regular presence at White House Covid-19 task force meetings and press briefings. The former chief of infectious diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital plays a central role in communicating the state of the pandemic to the public and leading an evolving set of guidance about best practices in schools.
- **Becky Pringle and Randi Weingarten:** Weingarten and Pringle lead the country's largest and most vocal national teachers' unions. While they're generally allies with Democrats and the Biden White House, they've been willing to pounce when they sense a threat to their membership. Pringle's National Education Association boasts a membership of 3 million, the nation's largest teachers' union. First lady Jill Biden is also an active member of NEA. Weingarten's American Federation of Teachers represents 1.7 million members across the country. She's also played a role in tough local school reopening negotiations in Chicago and Boston.
- **Jill Biden:** Getting students back into classrooms is personal for the nation's first lady as she balances work for her husband's administration with teaching at Northern Virginia Community College. She is also one of the most outspoken supporters of teachers' unions in the White House and hosted Pringle and Weingarten there just days after Inauguration Day.