

Prioritizing What Matters Most to Nevada Educators During the COVID-19 Crisis: Recommendations From Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows



As educators, like so many of our teaching colleagues across the nation, we have grappled with how to best ensure our students' needs are being met during the persisting coronavirus crisis. As Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we are deeply concerned about the impact of this crisis on student learning, health, and well-being. As the pandemic rages on, we have also become increasingly concerned about teacher health and well-being, making this issue equally deserving of examination at this critical moment for our educational system.

We are classroom teachers and learning strategists with diverse backgrounds and 100+ years of teaching experience in our respective schools. We represent urban and rural districts, as well as public charters throughout the state, encompassing over 450,000 students and 26,000 teachers statewide, including the 5th largest school district in the nation. We teach students in elementary, middle, and high schools as general education teachers, special education teachers, English language development (ELD) teachers, coordinators, and teacher leaders. We examine policies that impact our students, families, and the profession. Never has there been a more crucial time to use our collective voice than now, as we experience the COVID-19 crisis and its effects on our schools and communities.

Tasked with delivering equitable, high-quality instruction to students impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, teachers have pivoted quickly to remote education. Along with our students and families, we're continuing to adapt as we navigate the ever rapid changes in teaching and learning expectations, daily routines, and district and school policies surrounding remote education.

As teachers, we believe that championing for our students and families is critical amid the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. These challenges are also opportunities to reconceptualize education and build a system that is more equitable and excellent for all our children. As families, teachers, and education and policy leaders collectively prioritize and support our schools, we want to ensure that every student within our community feels valued, respected, supported, and cared for. In order for this to happen, we want to ensure that we respect, value, and care for our educators during these unprecedented times.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Like many districts nationwide, Clark County School District (CCSD) began the school year virtually due to significant concerns regarding COVID-19 and the potential risk of infection. On November 12, 2020 the CCSD Board of Trustees is scheduled to [vote](#) on a transition plan and the [reopening schools implementation guide](#) that includes



a consideration of in-person, hybrid instruction^{1,2}. Although details of the transition phase of the reopening plan are not yet fully known, the [original plan](#) called for students being grouped into three cohorts, with some students attending twice a week while others continue to learn remotely³. This plan was reconsidered in favor of the distance learning model, citing COVID-19 infection rates and concerns for teachers, staff, and student safety. The new plan re-introduces in-person instruction, at least in part.

As [Nevada](#) experiences a spike in positive COVID-19 infections,⁴ educators want to ensure that their students continue learning with “the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity [and] its responsiveness to individual needs.”⁵ Committed to the well-being of their students, they also want transparency of communication so that they may be better prepared to address changes to the instructional model and prioritize students’ physical, mental, and emotional health.

The hybrid-teaching model that CCSD is considering is becoming a norm in some states as communities seek to sustain and extend student learning. Transitions to hybrid-teaching models without comprehensive communication, preparation, and professional learning leave teachers, families, and students without sufficient resources and information to navigate new, unfamiliar teaching structures and rapidly shifting expectations. Students, families, and teachers throughout Nevada are concerned about the critical well-being of their most vulnerable family and community members. As the global pandemic persists, local and state communities are only [beginning to better understand](#) the risks associated with returning to classrooms, if only for a few days a week⁶. Early data from the [COVID-19 School Response Dashboard](#) indicate teaching staff were infected at more than twice the rate than that of students⁷. This number may actually be higher when suspected cases are taken into account. The COVID-19 School Response Dashboard demonstrates that infection rates for staff members are higher at hybrid schools than for fully in-person schools.

In addition to the health risks associated with transition to a hybrid-teaching model, there are other challenges to consider, including revising class schedules, ensuring adequate staff for class configuration demands, and planning new busing schedules⁸ in addition to providing social-emotional learning (SEL) support for students and teachers. A recent [survey](#) found 29% of teachers, specifically those on hybrid schedules, are overwhelmed and are considering exiting the profession⁹. In Nevada, particularly with [higher than average teacher turnover rates](#), this type of exodus would have a multi-year impact on students, families, and the education profession¹⁰.

We believe there are concrete strategies for districts and schools to implement in order to support students, families, and educators during distance learning and the transition to a hybrid-teaching model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Engage in Clear and Consistent Communication

To facilitate and support effective communication with educators and families, state and/or district/school leadership should create experience surveys focusing on SEL and wellness needs. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”¹¹

CASEL provides a [*Staff, Family, and Community Partner Survey on SEL Implementation*](#)¹² survey tool that can be employed as an example of such an experience survey. The data gleaned from the survey could be used to inform and impact how state and district leadership communicate with students, families, and teachers. For example, students, families, and teachers would appreciate receiving first-hand communication from school and/or district leadership about changes to the planned reopening of schools rather than learn of proposed changes through local media.

Teachers are best positioned to lead and support student learning and state, district, and school leadership should strategically leverage the expertise of teacher leaders. The state and district leadership could amplify the voices and experiences of teachers in their communications and could partner with teacher leaders to lead professional learning on the transition to hybrid teaching.

Provide Concise, Comprehensive Plan

The guidance for reopening the CCSD schools should include a concise, comprehensive plan that is clearly communicated to all stakeholders, including educators, families, students, and community members and leaders. The plan should clearly communicate parameters around student learning, teaching expectations, sick leave benefits, and extended family wellness, as well as non-compliance issues. Comprehensive plans should include shared state and local protocols for collecting and disseminating [*data on COVID-19 rates in schools*](#)¹³. It is imperative to incorporate contact tracing, cleaning and sanitizing, and safety protocols, as well as include clear definitions and understandings regarding the communication of student and staff exposure to COVID-19. Teachers' and students' voices should be incorporated as an integral part of the implementation phase of the comprehensive plans designed and proposed by the district(s).

Provide Ongoing Professional Learning Opportunities

SEL and trauma-informed practices should be integrated into teachers' professional learning experiences rather than exist as separate, stand-alone professional trainings. New pedagogical demands on teachers who must facilitate both in-person and virtual formats require ongoing flexible and equitable professional development.¹⁴ In a hybrid-teaching model, strategies must be translated for all learning options.¹⁵ State and district leaders should embrace professional learning for all educators, including early career, professional, and veteran teachers. The manifestation of professional

learning opportunities may look different in each district and school but should represent a commitment to student-centered practices that address the whole-student, cognitive, SEL, and physical well-being.

CONCLUSION

Supporting our teachers, students, and families is now more important than ever. Embracing this moment of connection and shared community trauma will allow education stakeholders to create a vision for the education system we want to exist after the crisis abates. We are confident that our local and state leaders, including our district school board(s), State Superintendent of Public Instruction, State Board of Education, legislators, and Governor, are prioritizing support of our schools, ensuring that every student and adult feels a sense of belonging and individual value, and has a network of caring peers to rely on even in the midst of overwhelming uncertainty. We are ready to collaborate and partner with district leadership and state legislators to ensure teacher voices are included in the planning and communication of new strategies, as we work toward an equitable and excellent education system for all Nevada students.

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ENDNOTES

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