

The R.I.T.E. Plan to Reopen Schools

Returning to an In-Person Teaching Environment

An Approach to School Reopening

Developed by the members of the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association

As teacher representatives and district officials engage in a divisive conflict over when it will be safe to return to schools, there is one group of educators who never left those schools. Since March, the principals and assistant principals of Chicago have been reporting to schools in-person. We ensured meals were distributed to families in need. We distributed thousands of laptops and mobile wifi devices to those same families in-person at a time when no mask mandate was in place, putting ourselves at risk of infection in order to serve our students. While some of us were able to avoid getting infected, several of us were not so fortunate. Today we continue to serve our communities by reporting to work in-person. For several weeks we have been the key people charged with making the district's in-person learning plan work in our schools. As a result, no group of educators has more insight than us on the safety and efficacy of the district's plan.

We appreciate the concerns of the teachers regarding the safety and instructional efficacy of the district's plan. We also deeply appreciate the district's push to give students more access to in-person learning. We presume the district sincerely believes its plans will work and, in some schools, they might. However, no matter how sincere the district's faith in its plans is, we need district officials to understand that their

faith does not square with the reality of implementation on the ground in most schools.

The district's effort to get parent buy-in for its plan is rooted in principals' relationships with our communities, so when the district's plan falters at an individual school, it will be the principal's failure in the minds of our communities. For example, we are being told by the district to send letters to parents about schedules that we cannot verify will happen. We've worked too hard to build community trust to squander it when they send their child to the class and there's no teacher. We cannot sacrifice relationships that we've worked so hard to build.

We hope our experience--and the perspective it gives us--is valued by the district and by teachers, and that each party sees us as valuable thought partners in this effort. Toward that end, we developed a compromise in-person learning plan to ensure safe in-person learning. From faulty ventilation systems to staffing shortages, to sinks and toilets that do not work--the truth is that some schools are simply not ready to return to in-person learning and this plan will give the district and those schools the time needed to address preparedness issues. We ask both parties to agree to this compromise.

The R.I.T.E. Approach

Pilot-and-Expand

While the district's current approach to reopening might work for a small percentage of schools, it is unworkable in many schools and will not establish in-person learning in a way that is safe for all. Nor will it create classroom environments that are optimal for student learning. The reasons for this are explained in detail in this report: [CPS Principals Identify Serious School Reopening Obstacles](#). As a result, we implore the district to pause its plan to resume in-person learning in all elementary schools and implement the following approach to resuming in-person learning.

The Three-Step Phase-In Approach to Resuming In-Person Learning

1. Open a small group of schools (e.g., 75) in a representative sample of Chicago communities where the administrative staff and an adequate number of teachers and paraprofessionals feel they have what is needed for a safe return. Make these staff a priority for vaccinations before the pilot starts. Consider allowing some schools in the pilot to open in-person to specific grade levels to account for staffing or space shortages, and expand as readiness issues are addressed.
2. Give the initial pilot schools additional staff including full-time health professionals five-days-a-week, and personnel to conduct intensive outreach to families to build trust and buy-in, especially in schools where a low percentage of families opted into in-person learning.
3. Work with the elected representatives of principals, teachers, support staff, and parents, to create the pilot and work with those same representatives to assess the success of the schools in the pilot. The "Essential Needs" listed throughout CPAA's [Reopening Report](#) should be used as evaluation criteria for the pilot, along with criteria developed by the district, CTU, and LSC's. If successful, expand the pilot after three to four weeks and continue to expand as groups of schools demonstrate preparedness and readiness for in-person learning. The district should open additional learning hubs that prioritize areas where there are no in-person learning options.

Example Pilot Expansion Schedule:

Feb 15: 75 schools total

March 15: 150 schools total

April 4: 300 schools total

April 25: 418 schools total

Benefits of the R.I.T.E. Approach

Getting it Right

- A pilot approach will allow the necessary stress test for the district to assess individual school needs versus the “one size fits all” approach of the current plan. This will give clear indications of what would be needed in every school to be fully prepared.
- Schools brought in for subsequent phases of the pilot would not have to endure the constant and confusing updates and changes to policies that we currently experience because the pilot period would give CPS time and space to develop and fine-tune a coherent package of guidance materials and supports based on the questions, concerns, and experiences of the schools in the initial pilot.
- The pilot period would enable the district to build a substitute cadre pool and know when the pool was large enough to expand the pilot.
- A phase-in would allow CPS to assess staffing readiness at individual schools, focus its resources on evaluating ADA and leave requests of a small manageable group of schools, find additional staff for those schools, and keep them staffed when in-person staff are absent.
- The pilot will give the district the opportunity to focus PPE resources on a small set of schools and fine-tune its calculations for reordering and replenishing PPE.
- Pooling resources in pilot schools will allow those schools to be outfitted with desk guards and other tech to function well.
- Our proposal provides a chance for district officials to actually come to schools for extended periods of time to see what we are dealing with and understand the inherent challenges and structural inequities that impact our ability to implement what they are asking of us; thus actually addressing those concerns and concentrating the over 100 million dollars invested in resources in schools that need them the most.
- This approach would give the district time to address issues with in-person cluster and Pre-K programs before attempting a districtwide reopening.

The Development of Local Expertise

- If successful, the initial in-person pilot--and each subsequent expansion--will create a group of peer experts and in-person learning ambassadors who can be a resource for administrators and staff in subsequent expansions of the pilot.
- As schools master the COVID-19 in-person processes and protocols some of the additional staff members could be shifted to the schools that are added when the pilot expands, and those staff will bring the knowledge they developed with them.
- The lessons learned by Talent and other district departments can be used to better serve the schools in the next expansion of the pilot.
- We will learn what works in a Chicago public school. We are not private nor Catholic schools. Private and Catholic schools have other resources for staffing and scheduling at their disposal that public schools do not. For example, private schools have local authority to determine a threshold for when to suspend classes or when to close school altogether.
- The pilot would allow the district to learn from schools as they work out reopening kinks and find concrete answers to questions that the district has not responded to adequately, such as:
 - How can a teacher deliver effective instruction to in-person and remote students simultaneously, especially when bandwidth issues might prevent in-person students from accessing materials being shared with remote students? The recently added professional learning series does not provide effective strategies for accomplishing this.
 - How do we staff and provide effective instruction in classrooms with in-person students where the teacher has been approved to teach remotely?
 - How will positive cases impact the in-person status of specific pods and the school overall? What criteria will be used to quarantine a pod or return an entire school to remote learning?
 - How will the district handle contact tracing for people who report the case to the school but not to the district?
 - How do principals ensure student and staff safety when CPS is allowing students in many circumstances to cross pods both in the school building and on school buses?

Increases Families and Staff Choosing In-Person Learning

- Priority COVID-19 vaccinations focused on staff who teach in the pilot schools will increase the number of staff who want to participate in the pilot program.
- The concentration of staffing and resources in the pilot schools would enable the district and school leaders to make a stronger case to families that reopening will be safe.
- If schools are successful, CPS can build the confidence and trust to bring other schools, teachers, and families back into in-person learning. The success of the pilot in a few communities of color will be a valuable incentive for families in other communities of color to opt into in-person learning when their schools are added to the pilot.

Avoiding Instability and Divisiveness of a Strike

- We do not want to face another strike, which will further disrupt students' education. Many students on the South and West sides have already faced school closings, two school strikes, and a pandemic. We must come together to prevent further disruption. This plan can be supported by principals, teachers, and staff who feel their schools are not ready to reopen, as well as by those who feel they are ready, and it can end the divisive stalemate between district officials and CTU.
- Many of the benefits cited above assume a successful reopening. However, it is possible that COVID-19 could indeed spread in schools. Either way, the pilot would end many of the hypothetical arguments coming from each side of the debate by creating a local body of evidence that could be used to either expand in-person learning or contract it. Either way, the decision would be far less contentious because it would be based on the reality on the ground in Chicago's schools.

Reduces the Negative Impact of a Failed Reopening

- While students of color would be the beneficiaries of a successful reopening, they will also bear the brunt of the consequences of a failed one. This approach makes failure less likely. It also narrows the number of students whose lives would be upended by the instability created if reopening is unsuccessful.

Note: CPAA will make a recommendation for the current pre-k and cluster in-person programs after we've completed a member assessment of them.