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## Staying afloat

*Months into a global pandemic, schools and universities have to focus on the short-term goal of reopening safely.*

**By Mike Kennedy**

**A** new year has begun, and it's natural to look ahead and try to identify and anticipate some of the trends that schools and universities will have to address in the future.

But when you've been blindsided by a flood of crises that leaves you struggling to keep your head above water, it's difficult to think about anything except getting safely back to shore.

So while many education institutions still are evaluating future facility needs, drawing up construction plans, holding bond elections, and calculating budgets, the overwhelming mission for schools and universities in 2021 is to get to a point where students and staff members can return safely to classrooms and resume teaching and learning that has some semblance of normalcy.

### When to reopen?

When the potentially lethal and quickly spreading nature of the Covid-19 virus became evident in March 2020, nearly all schools in the United States closed so as

not to risk the health and safety of its students, teachers and other employees.

Thousands of schools abruptly pivoted to online instruction as they took advantage of the technology and internet connections that have been installed in most every school over the last quarter-century. Concerns were raised about how the switch to distance learning was excluding poorer students who had neither computers nor internet access at their homes, but in the early days of the pandemic, the online setup was viewed as temporary solution to a short-term emergency.

But as summer turned to fall, the coronavirus was proving to be a more relentless foe, and most students still were receiving their instruction online or on a hybrid schedule of online and in-person classes. There wasn't sufficient information about the coronavirus to be certain about the health ramifications of returning students to classes and the risk of transmitting the virus in classroom settings.

Continuing to cancel in-person classes meant Covid-19 could not spread in that environment, but it also



meant students' academic performance, and possibly their mental well-being, could suffer. Exiled from classrooms, students also were missing out on other resources, such as counseling and school-provided meals.

But if concerns proved correct that gatherings of large groups students in confined, indoor spaces (i.e., classrooms) could accelerate the spread of Covid-19 in schools as well as in the community at large, avoiding in-person classes was the more prudent path.

That debate has continued into 2021 as vaccines to combat the virus have been approved, and students and parents are becoming increasingly restless to have in-person classes resume in full. Meanwhile, the U.S. death toll from Covid-19 had surpassed 425,000 as of late January, variants of the coronavirus that appear to be more contagious are spreading through the nation, and the health risks, especially for older people and those with pre-existing medical problems, remain high.

### Hope on the horizon

But after months of observing Covid-19 and how it is contracted, epidemiologists and researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say it may be time to curtail online learning and resume in-person classes.

In a paper published in January 2021 by JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, the researchers assert that schools, with certain conditions imposed, can return to in-person instruction.

"Accumulating data now suggest a path forward to maintain or return primarily or fully to in-person instructional delivery," the authors say.

In the early months of the pandemic, the virus spread rapidly in settings where people gathered in high density, such as long-term care facilities, prisons, and meat processing plants. But such outbreaks were not occurring at schools.

"As many schools have reopened for in-person instruction in some parts of the U.S. as well as internationally, school-related cases of Covid-19 have been reported, but there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission," the CDC researchers say.

Among the evidence cited:

- A study in Mississippi that found attendance at social gatherings and functions was associated with increased risk of infection, but in-person school attendance did not.
- Data from 11 school districts in North Carolina that were open in the fall for nine weeks of in-person instruction showed that within-school transmissions were very rare, and no cases of student-to-staff transmission were reported.
- A CDC report looked at 17 K-12 schools in rural Wisconsin with high adherence to mask wearing. It found that Covid-19 incidence was lower in schools than in the community.



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**ONE** clear trend that higher education institutions are dealing with in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic is a significant drop in student enrollment.

Denied the full social experience of on-campus living and unconvinced of the value of online-only coursework, many students decided to pause their pursuit of a postsecondary degree. In October, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that undergraduate enrollment had declined by 4.4% compared with the previous year's numbers.

The decline was worse among freshmen. The center's numbers show that fall enrollment for first-year students had dropped by 13%. Community colleges had a freshman enrollment drop of 18.9%.

The abrupt drop in enrollment comes as many higher education institutions already were struggling to remain viable. Covid-19 was the death blow for the financially strapped Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Mass., which saw much of its revenue evaporate in the lockdown brought on by the pandemic. The liberal arts school, which serves primarily minority and low-income students, agreed last year to combine with the much larger Boston College.

Some schools and universities, uncertain of what the higher education market will look like when the country emerges from the pandemic, have delayed or canceled campus expansion projects.

"We've definitely seen some projects that have gone on hold," says Steven Cunningham, academic sector leader for Columbia, a construction management firm based in Boston.

The uncertainty is especially an issue for student housing. Social distancing was not a concept that needed to be considered when most residence halls were designed and built; now it's unclear whether the student density found in a typical residence hall will be acceptable in a world where students and their parents are more alert to the risks of exposure to germs and diseases in shared living spaces.

"We were working on a dormitory in the later stages of design with a suite-style layout," Cunningham says. "They aren't sure if that made sense anymore. So they are putting it on hold until they have a better sense of where things are going to go." ■





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“The preponderance of available evidence from the fall school semester has been reassuring insofar as the type of rapid spread that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites has not been reported in education settings in schools,” the researchers say.

The authors’ findings do not mean schools can return to in-person instruction as it was before the pandemic. Mask wearing, social distancing, hand washing, enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, and improved ventilation are still needed to protect the health and safety of students and staff.

“All recommended mitigation measures in schools must continue: requiring universal face mask use, increasing physical distance by de-densifying classrooms and common areas, using hybrid attendance models when needed to limit the total number of contacts and prevent crowding, increasing room air ventilation, and expanding screening testing to rapidly identify and isolate asymptomatic infected individuals,” the researchers say. “Staff and students should continue to have options for online education, particularly those at increased risk of severe illness or death if infected” with Covid-19.

A successful resumption of in-person instruction in schools also will depend on cooperation from the community at large.

“Preventing transmission in school settings will require addressing and reducing levels of transmission in

the surrounding communities through policies to interrupt transmission (e.g., restrictions on indoor dining at restaurants),” the CDC researchers say.

### Playing Games

Although the CDC’s positive findings about in-person instruction are welcome news for schools, another aspect of the researchers’ findings may not be well received by some students and parents.

“Numerous media reports of Covid-19 outbreaks among U.S. high school athletic teams suggest that contact during both practices and competition, and at social gatherings associated with team sports, increase risk,” the authors say.

The report cites a December 2020 wrestling tournament involving 10 high schools that became a super-spreader event: Among 130 tournament participants, 38, or 30%, contracted Covid-19 (and only about half of the 130 were tested).

“Even though high school athletics are highly valued by many students and parents, indoor practice or competition and school-related social gatherings with limited adherence to physical distancing and other mitigation strategies could jeopardize the safe operation of in-person education,” the report says. ■

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