

New York outlines the when and hows of a return to school

July 14 2020, by Carolyn Thompson

New York parents and educators got some long-awaited answers to their back-to-school questions Monday, with Gov. Andrew Cuomo saying schools will be allowed to open in areas where the coronavirus is under control and education officials outlining a raft of guidance for whether that happens in-person, remotely or a combination of both.

Each of the state's 700 [school districts](#) has until the end of this month to detail school-by-[school](#) reopening plans.

Cuomo said they will be able to move forward with them in regions that are both in phase four of the state's overall reopening and have seen average daily infection rates of 5% or less for two weeks.

"Common sense and intelligence can still determine what we do even in this crazy environment," Cuomo said during a briefing. "We're not going to use our children as guinea pigs."

President Donald Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos have launched an all-out effort to pressure officials to fully reopen schools in the fall, threatening last week to hold back federal money from districts that don't bring their students back.

"He was wrong on the economic reopening. He's wrong on the schools' reopening," Cuomo said. "Everybody wants to reopen the schools. I want to reopen the schools. Everybody wants to reopen the schools. It's not do we reopen or not. You reopen if it is safe to reopen."

Students and teachers returning to buildings will be screened for illness, wear masks or face shields and keep six feet of distance when possible. Mandatory fire drills and lockdown drills will continue with social distancing and districts may have to stagger start times, install partitions or change hallway traffic patterns to reduce congestion.

If students are learning from home, districts should do everything in their power to provide devices and internet connectivity to students and staff and have a plan to reach students who don't engage, education officials said, addressing some of the biggest problems that arose when schools were abruptly shut down in March.

"Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the inequitable access to technology and internet services in students' places of residence was a priority to be addressed. The closure of New York schools and subsequent shift to remote learning only put a brighter spotlight on this urgent need," Shannon Logan, the state Education Department's technology policy coordinator said as the department previewed for the Board of Regents full guidance being released Wednesday.

Schools also must make sure that teachers interact with students every day, and not just to take attendance or check in, officials said. That, too, was a recurring theme from students who weighed in on the plans, officials said.

"They actually need instruction," Regent Lester Young said. "There's no substitute for that contact with their teacher."

The guidance prioritizes in-person services for students with disabilities and requires translated materials for those learning English.

Education Department Chief Financial Officer Phyllis Morris said the department would advocate for more money for schools from state

lawmakers but acknowledged the pandemic's impact on the economy.

Cuomo said districts will learn the first week of August whether they can reopen for the fall, but a subsequent spike that sends the infection rate past 9% would halt the plans.

The governor's office said the daily infection rate is the percentage of COVID-19 test results coming up positive each day on average. About 1% of COVID tests have been positive each day since mid-June across the state.

"There would have to be a very significant spike, and that's kind of the point," said Cuomo spokesman Jason Conwall.

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