

Posted on FaceBook, July 27, 2020

Comments from a MA teacher regarding student headed back to school under new rules:

Returning to school is scary. Here are some thoughts from an anonymous teacher in Westford. This speaks to the situation our littlest students will be facing in grades Kindergarten to 5th grade. 😞

I am sure you have seen the discussion of and have your own opinions on the opening of schools. I for one would kill to get out of my house and be able to do my job and do it well. I have been listening to the noise (and there is a whole lot of it) all over social media and have heard the reasons folks are pushing schools to reopen.

One of the most popular arguments I have seen for the push to reopen is that children need the social interaction, the return to normalcy, access to their teacher, and face to face attention to ensure their academic success and their social-emotional well-being. Let me first say that I completely agree; children need all of this. I am just not sure schools reopening will provide any of this better than a remote option. As our district pushes for an in-school reopen, I am struck by the encouraging language used to put folks at ease about a potential reopening. While I—and every teacher—will do everything within our power to make sure we make this as positive an experience as we can, I am increasingly concerned that parents have very little understanding of what school will look like when we see students in September as this reality has largely been left out of the narrative. The reality and specifics of the restrictions and new rules have not been laid out and I feel, especially for those pushing for a return, that this needs to be shared.

At our elementary staff meeting last week, we received our first look into what it will be like for us and our students upon a return. These changes are so stark that I can't imagine they won't increase anxiety for many of our students. They certainly have increased anxiety in the teachers. If we are using a student's social emotional well-being and needed social interaction as the platform by which we are sending students back, we should be aware of what will adversely affect all of that too:

Students taking the bus to school will not be allowed to sit with friends. As they sit in their seats, with their masks on, they will likely not be able to see other students as the seats are too high. No social interaction here.

Upon walking into the school, staff will be there to ensure students are not walking into the building or down the halls together. They must be appropriately distanced and masked, of course. Little to no interaction here.

Students will not be using cubbies or lockers and personal items will be forbidden. Jackets will be kept at seats. Backpacks will be prohibited. Students will be carrying nothing to and from school. (No directive given on carrying a lunch.)

Every table, bookshelf, bean bag chair, etc. has been removed from all classrooms. Desks only and they will be 3ft apart from edge of desk to edge of desk. (The DESE, knowing no school can fit all students with 6 ft. of distance, has relaxed the CDC's recommendation from 6 ft. to 3 ft.). If we are hybrid, students will be sitting in every other desk. If we are fully in school, each desk is filled.

Teacher's will remain at the board to teach. Teachers cannot circulate to check on work, address quiet questions, maintain management, etc. All of these, which are best practices for all teachers, would impact social distance and cannot happen. Not being able to kneel next to a struggling math student to help them through pains me more than a little.

If another room is available and can be booked in advance, a small working group, appropriately distanced, can take place. If not, we are looking at whole class instruction. At the elementary level, this is not how we teach. We seldom use a lecture format because our students are not ready to attend and engage as they are not developmentally ready for it. When and if we return, whole class lessons will be the norm as teachers keep to their designated space at the front of the room.

Math games and side by side group/partner work will be limited, if used at all. It will be quiet, in your seat, independent work. As you well know, we typically use a repertoire of independent, partnered, and group work. It breaks up the monotony and provides social interaction. Not this year.

If a student needs help with work or is in emotional distress for any reason, we have been told that social distancing must be maintained and we can do our best to comfort them from 6 feet away. It has been suggested that we have a signal to mean, "I am hugging you." Teachers will be wearing masks too, so even smiles will be difficult to determine.

Snack time is unclear as Westford is leaning towards not having students eat in classrooms. I am not sure where they eat but you can bet they will be heavily distanced. Little social interaction here.

We will be allowed to take one class of students outside for a recess at a time. They will have to maintain 6 ft of distance and much recess equipment will be off limits. The equipment allowed to be used must be sanitized between classes. They will be allowed to take off their mask outside provided the distance is maintained. At least they can smile or yell to each other here.

1 student at a time will be allowed into a bathroom. A staff member will be designated to monitor and disinfect the bathroom between each student. In our school, anywhere from 100-120 students use each set of bathrooms. We are at a loss as to how this will happen. Will we have a person for each girl's or boy's room? And where this will be the only time that students will be able to leave the room, we expect it to be a popular stop!

Classrooms at our school reach 93-95 degrees regularly during the first (and last) month of the school year. We do not have air conditioning. We have also been told that fans will not be

allowed as this will spread germs faster. That means 93-degree rooms, no fans or A/C, and we will all be wearing masks. I wonder how many parents would put up with an environment like that. I can tell you it depletes the motivation out of each child and teacher when it gets that hot.

Students will remain in their room, in their seat, for the majority of the day. Music and art rooms will be closed and students will remain at their seat for this instruction. If we have gym, it will be outside and socially distanced. Students cannot touch the same equipment or be near each other.

If we are in school for the full day, the school will have to deal with lunch. Westford is leaning away from having students eat at their desk because they will rightly need a break from that one space. As there is not enough room to distance in the cafeteria, the tables will also be placed in the gym. Our 8-10' tables, usually hosting 9-12 students will seat 1 child. Lunch is the most social time of a student's day and each student will be seated alone. The idea of seeing a cafeteria (or gym) filled with quiet students seated by themselves makes my heart hurt a little.

There will be designated spaces to house kids showing symptoms of COVID-19 until they can be picked up by parents. With everything else real (and imagined 😊) that ails children and the ever-growing list of symptoms related to COVID-19, I imagine that these rooms will see quite a bit of use.

If a student in our class—or a family member of a student—tests positive, all of the teachers and students will need to quarantine for 14 days. That is 14 days every time it affects a family member of someone in the class or a teacher entering the class.

This isn't about the lessons we learned in remote teaching and how drastically different it would look. This isn't about the sheer number of teachers who are at risk or who have a family member who is at risk and are scared to come back. I also know what an enormous weight it is for many when students are working from home or need help at home. I understand the daycare issues and that it affects everyone in the house if the kids are home. I understand that we are trying to choose the best from the list of really unattractive options.

I merely write this to demonstrate what will affect students returning to our school buildings. Perhaps it is just those of us who know what it should be like who are deeply saddened by this. In any case, those of us headed for it shouldn't be the only ones who know what it will look like. Thanks for reading.

--Author unknown