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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Make a plan to review your successes and failures of the COVID-19 crisis

Benjamin Franklin said, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” Those were wise words in his era and still hold true today, especially as schools look to move beyond the disruption and turmoil of the past year.

COVID-19 turned schools upside down. The new vaccines mean there’s light at the end of the tunnel. And with that, comes hope for a return to normalcy.

It’s natural to want to focus on the future and leave the upheaval of the past year behind us. But a lesson from this crisis is that schools must be ready for next time, whatever that might be.

So, where to start?

### Update emergency plans

Schools should update their emergency plans, addressing safety measures for epidemics and ways to continue educating and supporting students if schools are closed. Who would have imagined, before this pandemic, that this step would be needed? Few believed that schools would ever face a crisis that essentially kept the doors closed for nearly a year.

Review how your district and schools handled the COVID-19 crisis. Convene a cross-section of stakeholders to document steps that were taken throughout the pandemic and then evaluate their effectiveness. Include representatives from teachers, parents, principals, food service, custodial, special programs, athletics and others. What worked and what didn’t work? What could you have done differently? How can you be better prepared for a future crisis?

A good tool is a spreadsheet with three columns. In the first column, list the action that was taken. In the second column, evaluate that action, listing both positives and negatives. In the third column, include steps you didn’t take but perhaps should have.

As part of your analysis, assess your facilities and what changes might be needed to make them ready for distance learning. Evaluate your technology and the tools you have to deliver learning in alternate ways. One of the challenges many districts faced is a lack of technology to deliver online learning effectively. Some didn’t have enough Chromebooks or laptops to provide to every student who needed one. Some were situated in remote areas where all families didn’t have access to the internet. Some lacked the staff to provide sufficient technical support to teachers and families struggling to use new learning tools.

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## Compare notes

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Another key step is to compare notes with neighboring districts. Learn from their successes and failures, and be sure to share yours with them. Collaborate with community partners, such as law enforcement, hospitals, colleges and others. Share your experiences, and brainstorm how you might all improve your services and responses by working together in a strategic, collaborative manner.

## Refer to CDC guidance

Preparing for a pandemic is not totally foreign to schools. In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued guidance on preparing schools for pandemic flu. The guidance identified specific actions to plan for a flu pandemic before it occurs, which can be adapted for COVID-19 contingency planning.

1. Update the existing emergency operations plan based on various scenarios a school may face during a flu pandemic.
2. Address key prevention strategies in an emergency operation plan, such as promoting everyday preventive actions at all times, providing flu prevention supplies in school, identifying space that can be used to separate sick people, and developing a risk assessment and risk management process for the school.
3. Discuss and plan for school dismissals if the flu gets worse, including educating students if schools are temporarily dismissed (web-based instruction, email, social media, local television, radio stations or U.S. mail); identifying strategies to continue essential services; and identifying action steps for reopening school.
4. Communicate about pandemic flu and nonpharmaceutical interventions through updating emergency plans for distributing timely and accurate information across staff, students, suppliers and key community partners. Address potential language, cultural and disability barriers associated with communicating pandemic flu information to staff and students.
5. Get input and support for emergency operations and communications plans by sharing with staff, students and key stakeholders and developing training and educational materials about the plans for staff as well as testing and updating the plans every 12-18 months.

## Amplify the role of schools as community pillars

One of the good things that has come out of the pandemic is a greater appreciation for public schools. Pre-pandemic, the public was aware of the role of schools in teaching academics, but an eye-opener for many is how critical schools are in supporting the mental and physical well-being of students. In addition to teaching students, schools also feed them and provide social, physical, behavioral and mental health services. Another realization is how important schools are to the infrastructure of communities. Schools often are one of the area's largest employers, and while they are educating students, they are allowing parents to go to work without the worry and expense of finding childcare. Schools should understand their role as a foundation of their community and continue to build trust within their communities.

Until the current crisis is over, it is easy for schools to focus on more immediate needs and relegate updating emergency plans to another time. Just don't delay too long. The time to develop a thoughtful plan for dealing with a crisis is not when you're in the middle of one. You never know when the next crisis will come, and you want to be ready.