

# How Schools Could Physically Reopen in 2020

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*[Editor's Note: While much of the Governor's announcement was meant for K–12 schools, we thought our readers might be interested in all of these developments.]*

For the past several weeks Governor Gavin Newsom has been conducting daily press briefings to provide updates on the state's coronavirus response as well as unveil initiatives and executive orders designed to flatten the COVID-19 curve.

An issue that is regularly discussed at these briefings is when schools will be able to safely reopen their doors to students and teachers. It was only weeks ago that Governor Newsom affirmed that keeping schools closed for the rest of the academic year was the prudent thing to do and even discussed the possibility of maintaining distance learning programs for the remainder of the calendar year, meaning schools would not physically reopen their doors again until 2021.

However, a lot has changed since those briefings a few weeks ago as the state is becoming increasingly confident that the stay-at-home order and social distancing directives have been effective in controlling the spread of the virus, which has led to recent discussions about how schools could reopen their doors in a “physically restrained” way before the end of the calendar year.

At his press briefing on Tuesday, April 14, 2020, Governor Newsom detailed [six key indicators](#) that will guide his Administration's thinking for when and how to modify the statewide stay-at-home order and social distancing directives. One of those six indicators is “the ability for businesses, schools, and child care facilities to support physical distancing.”

When discussing this specific indicator, Governor Newsom offered his vision of what schools could look like if they were to reopen this fall. He explained that schools would need to reopen in a way that could support physical distancing such as implementing staggered bell schedules so students could begin and end their school day at various times, perhaps in different cohorts. He also imagines that schools would need to implement different lunch and recess schedules to limit the number of students gathering in one place and he would expect that the way schools conduct physical education courses and schoolwide assemblies would need to be reformed. He also emphasized the need for “deep sanitation” and “massive deep cleaning” as a necessary precaution in order for schools to reopen their doors next schoolyear.

While it is encouraging that the Governor is becoming more optimistic about schools reopening their doors before the end of the calendar year, there are a number of implications that the state would need to consider if schools were to reopen under the vision offered by Governor Newsom.

Having to come up with a plan to reopen schools in a physically restrained manner would add to an already long list of unprecedented, and in many cases unfunded, initiatives that local educational agencies (LEAs) are currently grappling with during this pandemic. This includes providing meals to students in a safe environment, delivering high-quality educational opportunities to students via distance learning, and finding ways to deliver the services detailed in students with disabilities' Individualized Education Programs.

Offering staggered bell schedules will also be difficult for LEAs as they prepare to implement the provisions of the late school start time bill (Senate Bill [SB] 328) signed into law by Governor Newsom last year. While the

law doesn't officially take effect until July 1, 2022, (or the date in which an LEA's collective bargaining agreement that is operative on January 1 of this year expires, whichever is later), there is a scenario in which LEAs may have to drastically alter their bell schedules for three consecutive schoolyears in order to guarantee effective physical distancing and then turn around and comply with the start-time mandates stipulated in SB 328.

The discussions about when and how schools will physically reopen their doors is likely to heat up when the Legislature returns from recess in May. Lawmakers will have to consider a number of implications of physically reopening schools and the additional resources that LEAs would need in order to reopen schools in a manner consistent with social distancing. We will keep you apprised of these conversations as they unfold over the next few months.