As the nation’s coronavirus outbreak enters its third month, whether and how Philadelphia’s public schools can re-open in September remains unknown.

But as the national response to the pandemic takes shape, the nature of the environment in which that decision must be planned and executed is becoming clearer.

At one end: a White House that steadfastly refuses to set national policy or endorse clear guidelines.

At the other: thousands of Philadelphia public school students whose lives have been dramatically disrupted, and whose needs in September will be greater than ever.

In between: the full, sprawling array of public, private and non-profit entities, each with its own interests and responsibilities, that make up Pennsylvania’s public education community.

In Philadelphia, this group — which includes city, state and school district officials, as well as advocates, lawmakers and service providers of all shapes and sizes — is just beginning to face the question of September. Many of the spring’s most urgent problems are now being addressed, and officials say they can now start planning for a safe and effective re-opening — and not a moment too soon.

“There’s a lot of timeline preparation, runway that we need,” said Naomi Wyatt, chief of staff for the School District of Philadelphia, at the May 14 meeting of the board’s finance and student achievement committees. “We’re feeling the pressure …. if we’re allowed to open but we can only have 15 students in a room, what would we need to plan?”

District officials say they’ll be looking to public health officials when it comes to the big decisions about when to reopen and how to do it safely.

“We want to do everything that we’re able to do to follow the guidance of the health community, the CDC and the state officials on this,” said Superintendent William Hite in a recent conference call with reporters.

And Hite says the District will continue to work closely with city officials to develop overall plans and strategies. But as September approaches, countless decisions about day-to-day details will fall to the District, which must grapple with everything from academic recovery plans to how to arrange desks and chairs, Hite said.

“Do we now begin to think about the furniture, creating structures that allow children to be socially distant?” said Hite. “How do you create one-way halls? How do you physically distance children in elementary schools’ small classrooms?

“We’re working on those things,” he said. “Everything is literally on the table.”

Beyond District headquarters, the region’s advocacy community is confronting a slew of issues raised by the pandemic. First and foremost is the looming prospect of major budget cuts, as the pandemic drains state and local tax revenue. Advocates statewide are pushing to boost the federal stimulus and prevent state legislators from cutting state spending. But advocates are starting to lobby to shape September policies as well. Among the leaders of the funding fight is PCCY, whose director, Donna Cooper, recently called on the District to find ways to keep any budget cuts from affecting in-school programs, including the...
Editorial

State, city officials must seize the opportunity to reduce inequity

If this pandemic has done anything that might be construed as beneficial, it has exposed in especially revealing ways the vast inequities in American education. School districts that were well heeled to begin with were able to transition to online learning almost immediately, with few hiccups. At the same time, districts like Philadelphia that already struggle to meet the needs of all its students had to mobilize in an extraordinary fashion — purchasing and distributing tens of thousands of Chromebooks, training teachers in technology that many never used before, and setting up dozens of stations around the city so families could obtain needed meals.

As a society we have all become used to these inequities, but this crisis has made the steep cost of tolerating them more apparent. And, one would hope, strengthened the will to do something about it.

Except that in the short term, this doesn’t seem to be happening. Traditional political considerations continue to dominate everything from views on the severity of the virus to whether money meant for schools can be diverted to other purposes. In Pennsylvania, school superintendents and advocates are literally begging Gov. Wolf and state legislators not to balance next year’s budget by cutting state education aid.

Speakers at a City Council meeting on May 20 acknowledged that everyone is hurting, but said we can’t be so shortsighted to put education, of all things, on the chopping block.

Instead of allowing this crisis to further decimate the District and increase the digital divide, we should be taking this opportunity to rectify some of the inequities. This will require some new ways of thinking.

For instance, buying 40,000 Chromebooks cost $11 million. That is a lot of money, but a pittance in a $3.2 billion budget. So why does it take this crisis for the District to make them more available? Chromebooks shouldn’t be something the District doles out in an emergency, but made permanently available to students.

Then there is the issue of internet access. This crisis has shown that broadband is as fundamental to American life as water and electricity. We don’t have the capacity here to knowledgeably address whether broadband should be designated a public utility. But it is clear that Philadelphia, or any school district, should not have to purchase hotspots so students can get online and do their schoolwork. That is a Band-Aid at best in addressing the much deeper issue of what should happen to close the “digital divide.”

Thousands of students in the District don’t have the capacity to get online. Superintendent Hite said the District has received more than 3,000 requests for 2,500 mobile hotspots it has purchased and is now distributing them on a case-to-case basis. He suspects the real need is far higher.

Hite has said several times that this problem is much bigger than Philadelphia. It has been a major focus for his superintendent colleagues across the country as well.

“This is tantamount to asking a school district to solve the problem of getting electricity to houses, getting water to houses,” he said on a call with reporters.

At its annual budget hearing, City Council members praised the District for its response to the pandemic and its work in pivoting to online learning. Members also signaled a desire to take up the internet access question by pressing Hite on District efforts to prod the internet service providers to do more.

But the lawmakers displayed a certain timidity around going out on a limb and supporting a modest property tax increase to help make the District’s financial future a bit more secure. And neither Mayor Kenney nor the City Council spoke about how ending the generous tax abatement for developers might contribute.

Donna Cooper, executive director of the advocacy group Public Citizens for Children and Youth, chided them to not miss the chance to demonstrate they are better than what she termed the “shortsighted cockiness” of the Trump administration and Republican Senate in addressing the crisis. “I implore you not to let the incompetence in Washington visit more pain on the children of this city. Show them what leadership looks like.”

This year’s high school graduates started school at the beginning of the last major recession and lived through the pain of the severe funding cuts.

Doha Ibrahim, a graduating senior at Lincoln High School and a student representative on the Board of Education this year, asked City Council to honor the class of 2020, deprived of the rituals of celebration for their achievement, by doing all they could to make sure the schools are properly funded. “Don’t send our schools backward,” she admonished.

And Board President Joyce Willerson laid out the facts: “The District has moved from a place of financial stability to a looming financial crisis that could be more severe than even what we lived through seven years ago when the District experienced a $300 million funding cut, which led to drastic layoffs, reduced supports for schools and significant decreases in school building maintenance and more.”

Of Mayor Kenney’s proposal for a 3.95% hike on the District’s portion of the property tax — which would cost the average homeowner less than $60 a year — she said: “Our children deserve nothing less.”

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Educating Children with Disabilities During COVID-19: 5 Things to Know

By Margie Wakelin

Over the last few months, education has been turned upside down. Classes have been cancelled and schedules disrupted. Classmates have been minimized to images on a screen.

Children with disabilities, who are arguably the most dependent on consistent routines and have the least ability to access remote learning, have been uniquely harmed by these changes.

At the Education Law Center (ELC), we have spoken frequently with families who are worried that the losses their children are experiencing will never be recovered. We are advocating to ensure that their children receive an appropriate education. That starts with understanding your rights.

1. You have a right to an IEP meeting. You have a right to disagree.

A cornerstone of the IDEA is the right to a free, appropriate public education, which includes special education and related services so that a child receives meaningful benefit. Despite schools’ physical closure, schools are still obligated to provide this powerful entitlement of an appropriate education.

Parents can and must advocate to ensure that their children receive an appropriate education. Such meetings are created by the IEP or 504 team to decide whether your child is entitled to compensatory education services to make up for lost learning.

2. You have a right to a temporary learning plan and Extended School Year (ESY) services.

As a parent of children with disabilities, there is a lot that she can do.

The way all students experience school has been drastically altered by the COVID-19 crisis and school closures, but the rights of students with disabilities stemming from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) largely remain intact.

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Parents can and must advocate to ensure that their children receive an appropriate education. Such meetings are created by the IEP or 504 team to decide whether your child is entitled to compensatory education services to make up for lost learning. These services are called “compensatory education.” If you have not had an IEP meeting or other school meeting during the school closures, you should request an IEP meeting.

3. You have a right to a written notice.

After the meeting, you should get a written Notice of Recommended Educational Placement (NOREP) or Prior Written Notice (PWN) that describes your child’s remote learning plan. It should explain that this learning plan only applies while schools are closed. When school reopens, your child’s services will follow the plan in place before schools closed in March. If you have not received written notice of your child’s learning plan for remote learning, you should contact your child’s regular or special education teacher to request it.

4. You have a right to a temporary learning plan and Extended School Year (ESY) services.

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Margie Wakelin is a staff attorney at the Education Law Center - PA. For more information, go to elc-pa.org, @educationlawcenter on Facebook, or @edlawcenterpa on Twitter.
Board urges residents to lobby to protect state funding for schools

The unprecedented coronavirus crisis could soon put Philadelphia school officials in a familiar position: begging Harrisburg legislators for money. But District officials say they don’t want that to happen, even as the prospect of a billion-dollar deficit has demolished what had been a balanced budget.

The pandemic’s hit to the state education budget “has the potential to erase all of the progress we have made over the last eight years,” said Superintendent William Hite.

This year’s District budget took a modest hit but is still in the black. But next year’s budget gap could approach $40 million, officials said, and within five years, the District could face a shortfall of more than $800 million.

The looming revenue shortfall could undermine not just the District’s finances but also its fragile gains in academics, staffing levels, and school climate. “This is not just about a budget, dollars and cents,” said Board President Joyce Wilkerson. “There are real children’s futures on the line.”

The depth of the fiscal damage to the District will depend in part on whether Pennsylvania legislators choose to maintain the state’s own financial efforts and to reject the temptation to use federal education stimulus dollars for state deficit reduction, board members said.

In theory, federal stimulus dollars are meant to supplement state spending, keeping school district budgets at their historic levels even as state revenues fall. But the stimulus law passed in March allows states to use the federal dollars to replace state spending, with the approval of a waiver by the federal Department of Education.

Such a move means lawmakers can balance state budgets, but leaves school districts without new revenues, forcing them to either cut spending or run deficits of their own.

Board of Education members are calling on Philadelphia residents to immediately start lobbying state officials to use stimulus dollars to “supplement, not supplant” state spending.

“Many public schools have made tremendous strides. … We cannot afford to take steps back,” said student board member Doha Ibrahim, a senior at Lincoln High.

Ibrahim said that she remembers well the hallmarks of the District’s austerity years under Republican Gov. Tom Corbett, who served from 2011 to 2014: crowded classrooms, deferred maintenance, and schools struggling to provide even the most basic support.

Corbett took office just a two-years of post-2008 stimulus money ran out; Pennsylvania had used that money to replace its own spending, and when it disappeared, Corbett made no effort to fill the resulting budget hole, state aid to districts plummeted, and to make ends meet, Philadelphia took steps that included laying off all school nurses and counselors.

“We have spent much of our time in classrooms with too many students … under leaky roofs,” Ibrahim said. “Honor the class of 2020 by safeguarding the education of all future classes. … Tell them not to send our schools backwards.”

**District takes steps to protect transgender students online**

At the urging of Board Education members, along with public school students and teachers, District officials have taken steps to protect transgender students as they participate in school online.

When learning became virtual, trans students and teachers discovered the challenge of getting Google Classroom to allow students to change their name in the system without exposing the change to parents or others who may not support the student’s choice.

Correcting the issue means the District can remain in compliance with Policy 252, meant to “ensure safety, equity, and justice for all students regardless of gender identity or gender expression.”

“We’ve solved the technical problem,” said Superintendent William Hite. “Now we’re trying to make sure we don’t create an additional problem … for the child who did not want their parent to know that they’re using a different name.”

At a Board of Education meeting in April, board member Mallory Fix-Lopez said that ensuring that students see the name they want to see is no small matter; students do better academically and socially when their preferred names and pronouns are used, she said.

“This is something that has been eating at me,” said Fix-Lopez, thanking Hite and his team for tackling the problem. “If I’m feeling this way, I can only imagine how a student might feel.”

Teacher Maddie Luebbert told the board at the same meeting that the District isn’t doing enough for LGBTQQ students and staff members. Policy 252 lacks a clear complaint process or enforcement mechanism, Luebbert said, and staff members need better training in LGBTQQ issues. Please force Policy 252.

Strengthen your commitment to queer people in our schools.”

**Early childhood sector seeks aid to avoid massive closures**

Child care and early childhood centers are asking the governor and legislature for “swift, limited and critical action” to save the “rapidly fraying early childhood education infrastructure.”

The coalitions Start Strong PA and Pre-K for PA want the Commonwealth
The deciding vote in favor was cast by Board President Joyce Wilkerson, a 30-year resident of East Falls who said she is a strong supporter of Mifflin, but had been swayed by changes in the application since Lab applied a year ago to move the entire K-8 school to the East Falls site.

**Student journalists document life during the pandemic**

Teachers and students at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering & Science and Franklin Learning Center are determined to keep student journalism alive during the school shutdown.

On the Carver Times website, teacher Kailyn Bradley set up the Carver Corona Blog, where each week she posts submissions from students, teachers, and community members. She said, “Students are sending in videos, pictures, and writing. I put pretty much everything in the post.”

She challenged this stereotype: “So many people think, ‘Well, students aren’t in school, so they can’t learn.’ [Students] are learning and researching and trying new things on their own. It’s not ‘virtual times TikTok’.

She added that she thought the blog is important not only for the students participating, but also for the students who are reading or watching. Above all, Bradley emphasized that the goal of the Carver Corona Blog is to maintain community and keep students from feeling so alone during this time.

Maintaining community is also at the center of the now-virtual newsroom of the Flash, a student newspaper club revived by students at Franklin Learning Center four years ago. The Flash’s website features articles about the virus written by students in March — before the closure — and the recently launched Flash from Home, a blog similar in style to the Carver Corona Blog.

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**City Council approves Board of Education nominees**

City Council approved Mayor Kenney’s renominations of seven members to the Board of Education and approved his addition of Ameen Akbar to the panel, which determines spending and policies for the School District and its more than $3 billion budget.

At a May 1 meeting, several Council members applauded Kenney’s choice of Akbar, who has spent his career working with underserved youth, particularly African American males. He has been a mentor and a basketball coach and has worked in juvenile justice. For 14 years, he has been a staff member at Youth-Build, a charter school that prepares students for careers by teaching them construction skills.

Kenney appointed Akbar to replace Board Vice President Wayne Walker, who declined to seek renomination for personal reasons.

Besides Akbar, Council approved the reappointment of seven current board members — Julia Dancy, Mallory Fxlopez, Leticia Egea-Hinton, Lee Huang, Angela McCollogan, Maria McCollgan, and Board President Joyce Wilkerson.

Kenney had also renominated the other original board member, Christopher McGinley. But in February, after the nominating process had concluded, McGinley announced he would leave as of April 30, citing family responsibilities.

Kenney has not given a timetable for replacing McGinley on the board, but he has asked the Education Nominating Committee to consider other names for the vacant position.

The unanimous approvals came after a hearing at which several Council members asked pointed questions of board incumbents, most of them related to fairness and equity.

The question asked by a city council member about giving the District the authority to set and approve a mayor’s appointments to the Board of Education, which was reconstituted in 2018 after 17 years of state control over the system under the School Reform Commission.

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School districts use a variety of tactics to keep learning on track

Educators say districts should seize the opportunity to create a new, better system for students and families.

By Connie Langland

In Los Angeles, the plan is to offer summer courses to any student who wants to sign up.

In Austin, more than 100 school buses with WiFi capabilities were deployed to apartment complexes and neighborhoods with clusters of families lacking internet access.

Charlotte-Mecklesburg and San Francisco, among other districts, opted to keep learning nondigital for children in the early grades, instead sending home printed materials.

And multiple districts began partnering with local television stations to offer educational programming.

In recent weeks, urban districts responding to the COVID-19 crisis scrambled to salvage the school year and at the same time began imagining how to serve students across typically dormant summer months and into the fall. Adaptability seemed to be the mantra as the spring semester limped to a close, and school leaders began mulling options for delivering instruction in — or out — of school come fall.

“We have to have a recovery plan for education,” Eric Gordon, chief executive for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, told the Washington Post. “I’m really worried that people think schools and colleges just flipped to digital and everything’s fine and we can just return to normal. That’s simply not the case.”

All districts were focused on keeping students engaged with their teaching, schools, and academics. But educators debated what should be expected of students and how to track their participation and evaluate the work they produced.

Many of the districts, including Philadelphia, adopted a “do no harm” approach to grading.

Los Angeles decided to record whatever the grades were when school closed in March, but added an incentive: grades could be improved by doing assignments and taking tests. Seattle, to much debate, opted to give all students an A.

In Long Beach, Calif., report cards were eliminated for elementary students for the remainder of the semester, students in grades 6-8 were to receive pass/fail final grades and students in grades 9-12 were to receive credit/no credit, with a chance to improve by doing work in June. The Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) polled districts and found about 40% of those responding were not grading this term.

CRPE researchers cautioned that this approach has its pros and cons. While “taking a more forgiving stance on grading now might alleviate stress for some students and administrators,” they wrote, “months of uneven expectations for student learning could create more inequitable outcomes in the long run.”

Some districts made it clear that they were looking to create a more accountable system for the fall.

“I anticipate a more robust and formalized attendance and participation accountability, as well as a reconsideration of the credit/no credit grading policy,” Long Beach Assistant Superintendent Pamela Sekir said in an email to the Urban Educator publication.

The CRPE researchers suggested that educators go a step further. “School systems may want to use this time to consider innovative ways to track student progress, give feedback on student work, and refocus on deeper learning and mastery,” they wrote.

Fear of regression

A big concern was over regression — students losing the skills and knowledge they had accumulated. So-called “summer slide” is a known phenomenon, and particularly affects students in low-income communities.

The fears were that a slide after six months without traditional school would be more pronounced and serve to exacerbate inequity.

The Los Angeles school system, second largest in the country, announced plans to offer summer school online to all students, which “we’ve never done before,” Austin Beutner, superintendent, told the LAist website. There will be three options: credit recovery for high-need students, instruction in core subjects in grades pre-K through 12, and enrichment opportunities.

Students might learn ukulele or guitar, in a partnership with Fender guitar and a non-profit, or do virtual visits to zoos and libraries.

Summer offerings were limited in the past by budget constraints but not this year. “We are going to provide the funding because there’s a ton of research that shows that learning gaps are problematic for students,” Beutner said.

Beutner also expressed uncertainty whether the city’s schools would reopen or whether the fall term would continue as a remote-learning venture.

Solutions from abroad

Districts have examples from abroad as they consider options for reopening schools. Pennsylvania Education Secretary Pedro Rivera cited Israel, which resumed in-person instruction in the early grades by capping classes at 15 students, and issuing them masks and hand cleaners.

Austria’s plan has gained notice: students are split into two groups, with one attending school Monday to Wednesday and the other Thursday and Friday, then swapping the following week. Under this arrangement, all students get five days of in-class instruction over the two weeks.

In Taiwan, students have their temperature taken, use hand sanitizer and step in a solution to sterilize shoes as they arrive. They wear masks all day except at lunch at their desks, where they are protected from infection by plastic barriers that separate one student from the next.

Denmark, among other countries, instituted social distancing, smaller classes and increased emphasis on hand washing and disinfecting of common places, including bathrooms.

One trend has been the creation of partnerships with local television stations to offer educational programming. The Fort Worth and Dallas districts joined with Univision to launch Unidos para Aprender (Together to Learn), 58 minutes of instruction in Spanish five days a week for students in grades pre-K through 5.

The plan was for teachers from both Texas districts to create content and host the programming including lessons in science, physical education, social studies, art, music, math, and social and emotional learning.

Other districts including San Diego, Memphis, Indianapolis, Chicago and Cleveland also were utilizing televised educational programming. New York announced a partnership with the WNET Group.

Providing laptops and hotspots

The Dallas school system won dozens for its quick transition to remote learning. Students in 20 high schools were already taking devices home as part of the rollout of a year-old strategic plan and Chromebooks to all students in grades 6-12 were distributed in March. Also that month, the school board approved up to $2.5 million for mobile hotspots after a survey showed 30% of households lacked internet access.

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In numerous districts, bus drivers became key to delivering not only food, but instructional packets and even internet services. In Austin, the buses were dispatched to neighborhoods identified as lacking WiFi.

The Duval County, Fla., school system, which includes Jacksonville, dubbed its effort the “Big Yellow Lunch and Learn” program with drivers dispatched along regular routes. That district’s free-lunch program — like those in countless other districts — has expanded in scope this spring and now includes dinner. And a bonus: Many of the lunch and dinner options can be heated at home — including turkey meatball subs and make-your-own chicken nachos.

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Planning Amidst Uncertainty

(continued from page 1)

arts, early literacy initiatives, and mental health supports.

“Our kids are having the worst year of their lives, just as we. It’s simply the worst time. Our conversations show that we know of mental health and social supports already in our schools,” Cooper said. “The same goes for arts instruction.”

And while board members have made the fight for funding a clear priority, the interim superintendent showed that they’re starting to wonder about September, too. Members told Hite that they want to know how his team plans to balance rising student needs with a sure-to-shrink District budget.

“I would love the administration to develop some scenarios,” such as the costs attached to various social-distancing approaches, said board member Lee Huang. “There’s such interplay between facilities and instruction [and] we have a very vulnerable population … we need more tangible articulation of scenarios, so we can get a handle on the tradeoffs we may need to wrestle with.”

Hite’s team has promised to deliver such scenarios, as soon as June. “We hope to have those scenarios mapped out in the next few weeks,” said Wyatt. Hite said he hopes a final decision can be made by mid-July.

“Once we make a decision, young people are going to want to know what the decision means to them,” Hite said. “They’re the ones who will be affected the most by it.”

Working groups and meetings

Since the arrival of the pandemic crisis, Hite says his team has worked closely with city officials, meeting weekly to plan and manage their response. Among the District’s key partners: the Managing Director’s Office, the Office of Children and Families, and the Office of Emergency Management.

Through the spring, much of the conversation between the District and the city has been about providing the most basic support to students and families, such as food and laptops. Partnership with the city’s social service agencies has helped the District connect with students outside of school buildings, said Hite.

“They’re helping us to locate families that we can’t seem to find,” he said.

Hite also hosts weekly update meetings with leaders of key unions, including Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Jordan said that the PFT is still talking to its own members in order to determine its exact priorities — a member survey has been completed and will be released soon — but he hopes to eventually work closely with the city and District on September plans.

“We remain very concerned about the feasibility of carrying out any scientifically based [re-opening] plan in such an enormous district,” said Jordan. “That is why we are spending a lot of time having discussions with our members, our elected allies, our union partners, and the community about what it would take to do this right.”

But union officials also said that they remain “continuously concerned” about how the District’s various tasks force and working groups are set up, or how the PFT might collaborate with them.

District officials declined to share details of those working groups. But Hite said he and his city’s supply chain partners are “valuable, and that talks with city partners have moved past food and laptops and onto the question of what comes next.”

“We are also now talking about summer programming, summer meal sites, summer services for families,” Hite said.

“Those talks are constant and ongoing, on a weekly basis … we’ve had a lot of interaction and alignment and integration with the city departments.” Plans now call for virtual summer school for about 15,000 students designed to mitigate learning loss.

Successfully planning for the summer will help schools come September, city officials say.

“We need to be very careful about thinking about … how we can mitigate the spring and summer slide and support students to start the new year strong,” said Sarah Peterson, communications director for the Mayor’s Office of Children and Families. “We’re providing virtual out-of-school time programs and WorkReady opportunities so that students stay engaged and have learning opportunities during the summer.”

But much of the District’s planning must still take place internally, and the rapid district and citywide scale of the pandemic and political factors make that a challenge.

Put simply: officials don’t know what exactly they’ll have to do, and they don’t know how much money they’ll have to do it with.

A good example is the simple question of how to clean buildings and classrooms. At May’s meeting of the board’s Finance and Facilities committee, interim facilities chief Jim Creedon told the board that his team is now in the “fact finding” phase of planning for several distinct forms of cleanup, including “confidence cleaning” for general-use areas, “specialized cleaning” for frequently touched items like keyboards or high-risk spaces like music rooms, and “response cleaning” that follows a confirmed infection.

The basic technique for such cleaning is clear, Creedon said. In the case of “responsive” cleanup, for example, “you basically air out the room for 48 hours, then you come in and clean.”

But what seems simple in theory becomes complicated in practice. When rooms are quarantined, students have to be moved elsewhere, and arranging such “swing spaces” can be a major challenge, Creedon said. Likewise, if social distancing requires smaller class sizes, students will need to use more rooms, which in turn drives up the cleaning budget.

And the budget ranks among the biggest challenges in this time. All that is certain is that this year’s state and local tax revenue will be lower than expected, and next year’s numbers could be far worse.

At the same board committee meeting, Chief Financial Officer Uri Monson said that the District is currently trying to whittle down its various contracts to those that are “essential,” but that what’s defined as essential “changes by the day.”

And the board that the District’s revised budget will have to plan for projects and policies that may not happen, while counting on revenues that may not arrive. The state budget, slowed because of the state’s economic downturn, will be released soon — but he hopes that the Trump administration says it will not implement — and ignore the one-pager.

“Our recommendation … will be to intensify ventilation,” the authors note, but don’t say how. “What exactly does this mean?” the doctors wrote. “Should they open windows? Put in fans? Install negative pressure ventilation? How are they to ensure that the ventilation system doesn’t facilitate the spread of infection?”

The national School Superintendents Association (AASA) is recommending that districts stick with the CDC’s original draft, which the District is following, but the Trump administration says it will not implement — and ignore the one-pager.

“Our recommendation … will be to follow that first report, official or not, because it gives pretty specific guidelines,” said AASA Executive Director Daniel Domenech. “The proposal that was leaked we found very comprehensive … apparently that was too specific for the administration.”

Districts weigh “hybrid” plans and additional closures

In this leadership vacuum, Pennsylvania school districts are developing their own plans. School district leaders are considering changes to schedules and learning plans, and planning for the likelihood of additional closures if and when new viral outbreaks emerge. Their strategies match some of the guidelines found in the newly released recommendations from experts at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), whose analysis suggests that safe public schools will require small classes, staggered schedules, and careful management to minimize risk to adults and students.

One early CDC recommendation was that schools be closed wherever infection rates remain high; the one-pager scraps this suggestion. Earlier CDC drafts also called on schools to develop plans to protect “high risk” students and staff; the final draft merely recommends that schools “screen students and employees upon arrival.”

Educators and advocates have savaged the new plan. The National Education Association called it “watered down” and “flimsy.” Danny Carlson, policy director for the National Association of Elementary School Principals, called it “clear as mud.”

In an op-ed for The New York Times, three medical professors said the truncated guidelines “ignore the current scientific evidence” and “provide little concrete guidance.”

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In Western Pennsylvania’s Erie School District, for example, officials are working on a “hybrid” plan of online and in-school learning. “You have to kind of settle on the fact that we are not going to be able to bring everybody back to school at the same time,” said Erie Superintendent Brian Polito. “There’s probably going to be restrictions on the number of students and class sizes.”

Educators will have to be ready to toggle quickly from classroom to online learning if schools are forced to close again, he said.

“What we’re really looking at is making sure that whatever we’re doing next year can be delivered either way, simultaneously, so that there is no disruption if we’re moving back and forth,” Polito said.

Closer to home, officials at the Lower Merion School District are eyeing a similar framework. Superintendent Robert Copeland recently sent a letter to parents saying that LMSD is considering “several basic scenarios” for the fall. “These range from a full opening on September 8, 2020, to a continuation of remote learning for all students,” Copeland wrote.

Among the many options facing LMSD: allow only half the student body into school buildings each day, while the other half works from home. LMSD: allow only half the student body into school buildings each day, while the other half works from home.

“Done right, the District’s new plan could carry benefits that outlast the coronavirus crisis. A well-designed distance learning plan would mean that officials could move past "school as this place-based structure only," Hite said. Students working remotely can tap into virtual resources, like online AP classes for students whose schools don’t offer them.

Maintaining that capacity even beyond the pandemic could make the District more effective, Hite said, but the classroom should remain the heart of the education system.

“We do intend to continue some sort of blended,” said Hite. “The ability to do some things remotely will be a possible solution, but it’s not a sufficient replacement for a student and teacher interacting on a daily basis.”

Plans unclear, but impact isn’t

But if the plan for September is unclear, one thing is becoming clearer: the coronavirus hits low-income and minority communities hardest, and students like Philadelphia’s are at the greatest risk.

The virus’ academic impact alone is unprecedented, Hite said. He expects students across the District to take a step back in their learning.

“I want to manage expectations for children who’ve missed five months of school,” Hite said. “Those children are not going to be where they would normally be.”

Among Hite’s top priorities for the fall: a series of academic assessments that can measure learning loss in students in every grade, across the District.

“We do plan some sort of assessment for every child, to see where those children’s skills are,” he said.

But officials know that academic issues are just the beginning. The full extent of the social impact on students and families is still emerging, but there’s little doubt that the blow will be heavy in low-income and minority communities.

Research from Johns Hopkins University has found that coronavirus infection rates in predominantly African American counties are three times higher than in mostly white counties. The death rates are six times higher. In Philadelphia, city data show that African Americans have “higher numbers of deaths and higher rates of death” than other racial groups, with mortality rates that are 30 percent higher than whites.

Experts attribute the gap to long-standing racial inequalities in health care access, nutrition, housing and income. In a recent essay for the American Medical Association, cardiologist Clyde Yancy said that the most effective coronavirus prevention policy — social distancing — is something not everyone can afford.

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“Being able to maintain social distancing while working from home, telecommuting, and accepting a furlough from work … are issues of privilege,” Yancy wrote. “In certain communities, these privileges are simply not accessible.”

How much the District’s policies can help stop the spread of the coronavirus into Philadelphia communities isn’t clear; experts disagree on the impact school closures have on infection rates. But as long as the virus affects life in the city, Philadelphia schools will feel the impact in the classroom.

District officials say they know that the coronavirus will mean a rise in stress, disruption, and trauma for students and their families. Hite recently announced a new hotline for troubled students, run by the Uplift Center for Grieving Children. Uplift’s Meghan Safran said she hopes the hotline will give young people a place to turn. “When kids are isolated, families are isolated, there’s a lot of worry, anxiety, and a lot of grief over things that are lost,” she said.

Akira Rodriguez, University of Pennsylvania urban studies professor, says that such support should carry over into September and beyond. Whatever the next academic plan is, she said, it should include a robust system for supporting students who are experiencing even more social and personal disruption than usual.

“We’re seeing this ongoing grief and trauma — the loss of income, the loss of jobs,” said Rodriguez. “You cannot teach a child with this level of trauma. Prioritizing not just physical health but mental health in the new school year will be a first priority.”

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Educating in a Pandemic

Teachers get creative to make online learning meaningful

While they care about academics, they are most concerned with relationships.

By Dale Mezzacappa

The Notebook has been regularly interviewing several teachers since the schools shut down to hear about their challenges and triumphs during this extraordinary time. Here are four stories. You can find more online at thenotebook.org.

MATTIE DAVIS

For Mattie Davis, getting in touch with her 23 first graders and their families during the school shutdown, has been, as she describes it, like extracting a slice of pizza from a hot pie just out of the oven. There is a lot of waiting while the melted cheese cools — you have to be careful that you don’t burn your mouth — and breaking off the gooey strands as you lift your slice requires a good deal of finesse.

It is delicate work, and it can take longer than you would like. But done expertly, the operation produces a scrumptious reward.

Davis, who teaches at William Dick Elementary School, has spent the better part of two months on her quest to reach all her students so she can get to her pay-off — the joy of communicating with her students. She loves to listen to them read, to ask them questions, and discuss simple math problems. All of this gives her more insight into how their minds work so she can guide them to the next level of literacy and learning, which is her lifelong mission.

In the best of circumstances, meeting the needs of all her students, and of their families, can be difficult at William Dick, which serves a mostly low-income African-American population in North Philadelphia. During a pandemic, it requires valiant and exhausting effort.

Since March 13, when schools abruptly closed, she has made more phone calls to parents than she can possibly count, at every hour of the day and night.

She has called one mother almost daily to remind her when she could pick up the Chromebook so her child could start completing online lessons. On May 19, Davis finally reported success — sort of. The parent had gone to pick up the Chromebook at 440 North Broad Street on Monday, and Davis reached her on Tuesday. “I thought she had the computer, but she said when she got there, it was too late,” she reported. “She told me she’s going back tomorrow.”

Dick is in a neighborhood marked by transience, and she said that since the school shutdown, three students have moved, one to Darby, but these three are among the 17 who keep in regular touch.

Among the other six, there are different stories. One child regularly submits work, but her mother never answers the phone for a conference. “I keep leaving messages telling her that it is important for me to hear little so-and-so read,” she laughed. Still, the mother never picks up. “But yesterday I kept getting alerted: ‘Student Z submitted work…Student Z submitted work.’” The next day, she finally answered the phone and scheduled a conference, but then was a no-show.

There are two students for whom the contact has been so spotty that she had to ask school officials for help. If families can’t get Google Classroom to work, she talks to the student over the phone.

In a student conference about math, one little boy was delighted to discover after explaining how he got an answer that “repeat addition” is the same as multiplication. ‘I told him, as you get into grade two, you’ll be doing more of this…Instead of three plus three plus three, you’ll be doing three times three for your equation.’ So, he was going, ‘Oh, I got this.’”

Lately, Davis said, she has found herself reassuring some parents, many of whom are very young. She tells them they need to ground themselves and cope with this unprecedented crisis, which for many is further disrupting already unsettled lives.

“I tell them, the children are watching, you have to stay in your chill space,” she said. “It reminds me a lot of how it was after 9-11. While I tell them it is okay to express certain feelings, they need to make sure their children aren’t seeing them in a certain way. [The children] know that we’re all human, but the little ones, so impressionable, you have to help them feel that everything is going to be okay.”

She adds a caveat: “I don’t have all the answers, I’m just a first-grade teacher.”

KATHERINE COHEN VOLIN

Two months into online learning, Katherine Cohen Volin has reached a conclusion: it is not much fun. She teaches English Language Arts to seventh graders at Joseph Greenberg Elementary School.

Volin has always tried very hard to instill in students a love of learning for its own sake. This wasn’t always easy even in normal times, but she had more options: hands-on projects and lessons, field trips. Plus, she had all the family situations, making it difficult to evaluate how students were feeling.

Online, she says, all this is much harder, not to mention the difficulties with simply communicating expectations to students and their families.

Greenberg is in the Far Northeast, and its feeder area has a wealth of immigrant families — Palestinian, Dominican, Uzbek, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean Russian, Georgian. And more. The largest single group, as much as 30% she guesses, is from one state in southern India, Kerala, where the people are Christian and the native language is a dialect called Malayalam.

“My class looks like a Disney classroom, what they want when they say diversity,” she said.

Although most of her students are not English learners themselves, many of the parents do not speak fluent English. With school out and her students in all different family situations, making sure everyone understands what’s expected of them has become all-consuming while her actual teaching has almost taken a back seat.

She has had in class the Far Northeast’s “most settled family” so far. “I think it is okay to express certain feelings,” she said. “I don’t have all the answers, I’m just a first-grade teacher.”

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The few students who are English learners “are really struggling,” she said. She spoke of one boy who is using Google translate, but said “he’s been absent for a long time. When he feels this is too hard, he shuts down.” She is still trying to get him to complete an assignment from before the shutdown. He uses email like text messages, “rapid fire, unclear questions.”

And lots of times, she said, students and parents don’t sign their emails — the email is identified by the student ID, an 8-digit number — meaning that the teacher has to take the extra, time-consuming step of figuring out who it is.

It is all very trying, but there are great moments. A highlight of the normal school year had been a trip to either the University of Pennsylvania Museum or the Art Museum while studying mythology. Volin despaired on losing that, but then a student suggested a virtual tour, which happened in mid-May. An Art Museum educator joined the class to talk about its famous Prometheus Bound painting by Paul Rubens.

“Not being in school is very bad for students’ social-emotional well-being, but having nothing would be so much worse,” she said. “I feel like at least they have some structure in their life, some responsibility, some sense of community and purpose. And they’re doing some reading and writing every day. That’s important.”

JESSICA MORRIS

Right before winter break, the third graders in Jessica Morris’s class at Andrew Jackson Elementary School in South Philadelphia had a big debate. The question was over what issue to tackle for their project that highlights something important to them and to their community.

Morris is a Need In Deed teacher, meaning she works with the nonprofit on service-learning projects that bring the real world into the classroom and highlight the importance of student voices — no matter how young.

“We started the school year observing our community and taking note of what we love, and what we don’t love, about our community,” Morris explained. “We came up with an enormous list of issues.”

They narrowed it down to three: homelessness, consideration (meaning how people treat each other), and animal welfare. “By the end of the day we went with animal welfare,” said Morris, who is in her third year of teaching.

By mid-March, they had spent a lot of time delving into the topic, and had heard from several community partners, which included organizations like Hand2Paw, Philly Pet Care, and the Lancaster Farm Sanctuary. More presentations were in the works, ranging from a local café that serves only vegan meals to animal shelters run by PAWS.

The question was over what issue to tackle for their project that highlights something important to them and to their community. On Friday, March 13, Morris had a few hours warning.

(continued on page 12)
Educating in a Pandemic

Teachers

(continued from page 11)

"When we found out the closure was indeed happening, I sat down with the kids to ask, what are your ideas, what animals, what actions should we take," she said. Right after the shutdown she continued meeting virtually with the class via Zoom. "I was afraid of that breach they are willing to take learning risks."

Some of her students spend a part of their days in regular classes, which is something they are now missing out on. They are not getting their inclusion meetings set, she explains. Nor are they getting speech therapy, which for many is also part of their Individualized Education Plan, or IEP. "I don't know how the District is going to get around that," she said.

Students do have the option to attend the "specials" classes — art, music and physical education. But she doesn't want to make students think that is required. "I don't want to overload them," she said. "Their parents won't want to go to a level of frustration."

From the beginning of the shutdown, a focus has been on meeting the needs of special education students, who are entitled under federal law to a "free and appropriate public education." At first, the District balked at doing any online learning for fear that it could not provide what is legally required to students with disabilities.

But then both federal and state guidance adjusted to a standard of making a "good faith effort" to meet their complex needs. But that definition is far from precise, and has already inspired one lawsuit filed by a private attorney on behalf of two students in Bucks County.

She has attended at least one IEP meeting via Google Meet as well, but a lot of the information she needs documenting student progress was "on paper and left in the school building on March 13, when just a two-week shutdown was anticipated. Come September, she said, she assumes that most students' IEPs will have to be amended.

At first, Messina wasn't sure that the District was providing enough help to teachers of special education students. She feels that things have gradually gotten better. But the 9th week of teaching and learning, I feel the District is now providing a reasonable amount of resources for special ed, and I feel for the first time they are really trying to support students who also lack that skill," she said.

She adds, though, that colleagues who teach younger children with autism tell her they are having a harder time because many don't know how to type or log in, and their families members may not have the skill.

Messina rewards her students on Friday with special events: a prom, a beach day, a birthday party. It is all designed to keep them happy and motivated.

"I have a family in Room 109, we have relationships, and that's what is most important for them right now."
"A communal trauma:" Counselors help students combat stress amid pandemic

Counselors do weekly check-ins with students, offering emotional support and academic advice.

By Neena Hagen

Faced with the hospitalization of loved ones and uncertainty about their future, it’s not surprising that many students feel immense stress amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

At Masterman High School, juniors and seniors fret over the constantly changing college landscape. At Carver High School of Engineering & Science, many students worry about their financial aid packages. And at Strawberry Mansion High School, some students have run away from home because of unstable family situations.

Helping students navigate these issues is the mission of their school counselors. A counselor’s job has always been a delicate balancing act between offering students the right emotional support and handing out tips for academic success. But for many counselors, like Tatiana Olmedo, a counselor at Carver, the pandemic has made their jobs harder. Olmedo said that at Carver, school staff have weekly meetings where they exchange contact information for students they haven’t been able to reach.

Olmedo’s not quite sure how many students at Carver are unaccounted for, but District-wide, that number has reached 1,500, according to District Chief of Staff Naomi Wyatt. About three-quarters of students in middle and high school are participating in online school, though the District’s methods for measuring class participation don’t include check-ins with counselors.

Offering emotional support

At Masterman High School, the top-ranked public school in the state, students are usually feverishly concerned about their academics. But in the age of COVID-19, counselor Heather Marcus cares less about whether students are logging on for class every day and more about their emotional well-being, as some families in the Masterman community have tested positive for the virus.

“If we have a student who’s not attending class, our first question is not ‘why aren’t you doing your work?’ It’s ‘are you OK and are you safe?’” Marcus said. “Sometimes the answer is, ‘I’m waking up late and not getting to class on time,’ but sometimes it’s ‘my family member works in healthcare and I’m worried.’”

When school buildings closed for good on March 13, Marcus and other counselors sprung into action designing resources to send out to students and families. Immediately, on the Friday that schools closed, Masterman counselors began offering office hours via Zoom and Google Meet. (Zoom has been banned in a lot of public schools because the meetings can be hacked).

Masterman counselors also distributed resources that parents could use to talk to their children about the coronavirus, followed by a list of tips to manage stress. Several of the resource pages developed by Masterman counselors have circulated throughout the District via the group Philly School Counselors United, so counselors don’t have to “reinvent the wheel” when giving out advice to students and families.

But those resources aren’t a blanket solution. The needs of many students in the District differ drastically from those at Masterman, where the students worry mostly about their academics and not unstable home lives.

At Strawberry Mansion, the picture of need is much different than at special admission schools, according to Lakisha James, a counselor at Mansion.

“Some of these kids are going through things you wouldn’t believe,” James said.

Many Mansion students are raised by their grandparents, because their parents aren’t able to care for them. Others languish in the foster care system and have problems with behavior and academic performance.

One of James’s students almost became homeless before the pandemic began — his mother had made the decision to move to a different house, and he no longer wanted to live with her. That student would routinely act out and use obscene language with teachers, and school officials often had to discipline him for his behavior. But the conflict with his mother was resolved shortly before the pandemic began — they both decided to remain in their house — and, (continued on page 14)
Counselors help Students

(continued from page 13)

With James’s assistance, he began seeing a therapist outside of school. He’s been one of the success stories at Mansion this year, James said.

During the pandemic, James said the main concern has been ensuring that kids are safe at home, since many don’t come from ideal living situations. “Some of them appreciate the break, but I think some of them are missing their outlet to get out and get away from home, because home isn’t always the best environment.”

Since the pandemic began, James and school staff have routinely done check-ins to make sure Mansion students are safe and reasonably comfortable at home. They exchange regular phone calls and text messages with students, and in cases where students aren’t reachable, they’ll sometimes venture out to the home to see if everything’s OK.

Connected to the school’s internet service, neighborhood schools also have lower rates of internet access, so videoconferencing has been off the table for some members of the community.

As many as 80% of Mansion students had to borrow Chromebooks from the District and take advantage of two months of free internet that Comcast is making available to low-income families in the Philadelphia area. But the transition to distance learning has been relatively successful at Mansion so far — 75% of students are participating in their classes and only five out of the school’s 185 students are unaccounted for, according to James.

Seventy-five percent participation is the average for middle and high school kids. But it’s good that Mansion is hitting that mark now, since it consistently ranks far below the District average when it comes to performance, attendance and graduation rates.

Despite the newfound technological difficulties and emotional challenges associated with the pandemic, counselors told the Notebook they’re not receiving an influx of calls from students in need of emotional support — and they’re not quite sure why that’s the case.

“I don’t think the volume of calls has been high,” Marcus said. “But that could mean that students aren’t reaching out for support when they need it.”

Brenae Warner, a junior at Academy at Palumbo, which is also a special admission high school, said she has several friends and family members who have tested positive for COVID-19. She said it can be difficult to focus on schoolwork when her loved ones are in and out of the hospital.

As a result, she sometimes feels she isn’t getting from counselors what she really needs.

“They send their regrets and say ‘I understand we’re going through this pandemic,’” Warner said. “But given her main concern right now, she feels counselors are disregarding the emotional aspect and focusing more on academics.”

Though Marcus is a counselor at Masterman, not Palumbo, she said it can be difficult to tell when students need mental health support, especially when they don’t explicitly ask for it.

“My highest school there’s often more of a focus on academics and college planning,” Marcus said.

College plans up in the air

College is a major point of stress for many high school students right now.

“There’s just so much uncertainty,” said Olmedo of Carver.

Most colleges closed for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year — students vacated their dorms, classes went online — and many institutions haven’t yet announced if they’ll be online in the fall. The uncertainty has led some students to consider a gap year. Other students have also considered taking classes at a Community College of Philadelphia.

“If schools are going online anyway, you might want to save money and just take classes at CCP,” Marcus said.

“One of the main jobs of a counselor is to advise students about financial aid packages,” Olmedo said. But now there is something else to consider: “Do you really want to take out all those loans when you’re not going to get the on-campus experience.”

The school closures have made deciding where to go to college harder for students, Marcus said, because they can no longer visit college campuses. But some colleges offer virtual tours. The website, You Visit, offers free virtual tours of more than 600 colleges. That can be a game changer for economically disadvantaged students, who can’t necessarily afford to visit every college on their list in person.

Olmedo said Carver has given students the assignment of taking one or two virtual college tours. Masterman has also provided access to virtual tours on its Distance Counseling for Juniors page.

But with cancelled standardized tests, the pandemic has caused possibly more stress for juniors who still have to apply for colleges in the fall and winter. The College Board cancelled all SATs for the spring in March around the time schools closed. As a result, a lot of schools, like Cornell, that usually require standardized tests, have now gone test optional. So far, however, Pitt, Drexel and UPenn, all popular choices for District students, still require the SAT or ACT. Temple has been test optional since 2014.

Palumbo student Warner said the cancellations are unfortunate for students who have spent several hours a week preparing for standardized tests. “Yes, some schools are going test optional, but it doesn’t really feel like we have an option if we never get to take the SAT.”

The pandemic has also affected the College Board’s AP exams, which got off to a rocky start on May 11. The College Board put the exams online this year and nixed the multiple choice section, only giving students 45 minutes for the response. The exams are also open book this year — they’re usually closed book.

But the start of the exams was marked by widespread server crashes and evidence that students were relying on Google searches for test answers — a practice not banned, but strongly discouraged by the College Board.

Warner also worries that some colleges on her list, which includes NYU, Drexel and Temple, won’t accept AP credit because of the exams’ contested format and problematic rollout. Pitt, Temple and UPenn say that so far there have been no changes to their AP policy, but they haven’t necessarily finalized a decision yet.

Every changed or cancelled standardized test contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the college process, as does not knowing whether or not college will be online or in-person in the fall. Students say they’re stressed, but counselors across the District say they are equipped to handle it.

While the District is “pumping out chromebooks” and wants “students to log in and do their work,” Olmedo said, “we have to remember that we’re suffering a communal trauma here. We have to step back and really make sure the children are doing OK emotionally.”

Neena Hagen, a Notebook intern, is a student at the University of Pittsburgh and a graduate of Philadelphia public schools.
THANK YOU!

We would like to extend a warm thank you to all teachers who are working so hard to keep their students engaged and learning during this difficult time.

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