

How Can Districts Prepare for the Next Pandemic?



By [Caitlynn Peetz](#) — July 14, 2023 ⌚ 7 min read



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In hindsight, Kenny Rodriquez is glad his school district spent time updating its plan for responding to pandemics around 2017.

At the time, it felt a little “dystopian” and potentially like a waste of time, he said in a recent interview.

“It was one of those things where it was like, ‘Man, wouldn’t it be weird if we ever had to set up something like that. That would be nuts,’ ” said Rodriquez, superintendent in Grandview, Mo., located south of Kansas City. “It just seemed science fiction-esque as opposed to a real hard reality that we were going to prepare for.”

Still, district leaders refined and clarified procedures, including preparation for when other agencies would need to use school facilities to administer vaccinations.

Then, in early 2020, COVID-19 hit, turning public education on its head, and those plans that once felt far-fetched were suddenly put to use.

Even with a plan, COVID-19 was unpredictable and affected every part of schooling in ways previous illnesses hadn’t. The 3,700-student Grandview district, like most others, didn’t explicitly plan how it would continue classes during extended building closures, probably because such lengthy closures hadn’t happened in recent history.

Studies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic found that less than half of public schools had written pandemic-response plans. The plans were more common at the district level, with about 74 percent reporting crisis plans that addressed “pandemic influenza or other infectious diseases,” according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office shortly after the pandemic began had nearly identical findings.

The catch: only about 40 percent of all districts had plans that included how they would continue schooling during unanticipated building closures.

“Given that it’s the core focus of schools and the core work in which they’re involved, that’s sort of a glaring omission,” said Chris Curran, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Florida who has studied schools’ pandemic response plans. “But part of the reason they didn’t exist is because it was very hard for any of us to imagine a situation like COVID as something we’d see in our lifetime.”

Now, that appears to be changing, as school districts use their experience reacting to COVID-19 to craft pandemic response plans for the future.

At least [one recent study](#) suggests more schools have developed written pandemic plans since the onset of the pandemic. In January, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 82 percent of public schools had a plan for pandemic disease, and 93 percent said they felt “somewhat” or “very” prepared to handle a pandemic.

“The truth is right now, while the storm isn’t upon us, is the time to be considering and planning for what hopefully will not come again for a long time,” Curran said. “But the reality of infectious diseases is, we will at some point see it again, and there are lessons we can learn from this time.”

Preparing for extended school closures could be beneficial outside of future pandemics, too, Curran added. Those plans could be activated in the event of a natural disaster, like a hurricane.

“The hope is we won’t see something on the scale of COVID again for a long time, but it’s likely we’ll all be out of school at some point for

something like snow storms or disasters, and it's crucial to have systems in place to do the best that we can for students," Curran said.

In Missouri, Grandview's district leaders are reflecting on what worked well during the pandemic and focusing on how to replicate that in the future. But they're also taking a hard look at the things they can do better, Rodrequez said.

The key: Keeping students and their parents engaged, even when they're not in school buildings.

To do that, online education needs to be more robust, families need more support when parents have to work during the school day, and community partnerships could be leveraged better, he said.

"It took something like that—shutting down—for us to learn some of those things about ourselves, and I feel like we're far enough past it to say, 'What did we learn from it and how are we different?'" Rodrequez said.

[A 2020 survey by the RAND Corporation](#) found that schools that had better plans, had provided devices like laptops or tablets to at least some students, had conducted teacher training on delivering online instruction, or had previously offered online courses, were more likely to feel confident in their COVID-19 instruction plans.

Those schools were more likely to keep assigning letter grades for students' work and least likely to be concerned about providing equitable instruction to all students, the report said.

Districts can't plan for everything

It's unrealistic to attempt to plan for every possible problem a pandemic could lob at schools. COVID, for example, defied expectations by being far less fatal to children than other respiratory diseases, and district leaders have faced fierce backlash for being overly cautious and keeping kids out of buildings at the cost of their academic progress.

It would be a painstaking, and probably useless, task for education leaders to devise a plan for every "what if," Curran said.

Instead, they should focus on planning for higher-level scenarios, he said. One set of plans, for example, would apply when an infectious disease is airborne and another when an infection is spread primarily through contact with others. Such plans would also depend on whether the infection causes widespread deaths or not, Curran said.

It should also clearly detail which government departments or agencies the school district will communicate with or look to for guidance, and whether other agencies are responsible for any parts of the response plan. For example, does the local or state government determine when school buildings close? In addition, it should outline who in the district is responsible for school-level decisions about things like masking or distancing guidelines.

Having that roadmap in place can take some of the confusion out of already high-stress situations, Curran said.

“I think those are the kind of concrete things that could be in place ahead of time that allow the district to be set up to nimbly adapt to the specifics of a particular situation,” he said. “The key here is having a plan ... so that we know who’s in the lead, who’s consulted with, who’s responsible for making different decisions.”

Focus on processes, but leave room for flexibility

In Montgomery County, Md., just outside of Washington, district leaders in 2022 hired a medical officer, an administrator tasked with helping the district—one of the country’s largest, with more than 158,000 students—to navigate the pandemic. She serves as a liaison to the county and state health departments, reviews and interprets their guidance, and recommends health policies and strategies to senior leadership.

Though initially hired with a primary focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, Patricia Kapunan also manages the district’s plans for future public health emergencies and responses to students’ and staff members’ health needs.

It’s unusual for districts to have their own medical adviser on staff, though a couple of other large districts, including [Los Angeles](#) and [Philadelphia](#), also appointed such administrators during the pandemic.

Kapunan said that her approach to pandemic planning focuses on establishing processes for predictable events, while leaving room to adapt to unique situations. That includes:

- Prevention, including how to keep schools clean, increase sanitization, and encourage hand washing and vaccination.
- Monitoring, including creating processes for people to report a positive diagnosis, outlining which agencies schools must report positive cases to, and determining when and how to communicate a positive diagnosis to families and staff.
- Continuing education in the case of extended school closures, which could include how to ensure students have access to the internet and devices, how to keep classes engaging and track attendance, and making sure curriculum continues to align with district and state standards.
- Communicating with families and employees about the status of the disease in the community and how it's affecting schools, policies and procedures for response and prevention, and any changes to how schools operate.

“Our goal is not to completely eradicate COVID,” Kapunan said. “My goal as a physician for the district is to provide a safe environment for learning and academic engagement and to do that equitably amongst all students.”

It's also important, Kapunan said, that districts don't lose sight of how the effects of a pandemic or disease outbreak in the community affects the work of the school system. For example, more vulnerable communities—including those with compromised immune systems and older residents—are often the hardest hit by disease, she said. Deaths within a family or parents losing their jobs may not seem directly tied to schools, but they can seriously affect a child's ability to focus on school work.

“When I look at pandemic recovery, I'm not just looking at learning, I'm looking at all of those other influences and their overlap,” Kapunan said. “We have to have those conversations about the way they impact children.”



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