



THE SOUTH CAROLINA
SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

OPINION

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School boards want options, flexibility to safely reopen schools

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As South Carolina prepares to emerge from a three-month crash course with statewide online learning, the S.C. School Boards Association asked local school board members from across the state to share their views on how their districts fared this spring and what they hope to see as schools resume operations in the fall.

As the state develops its guidance for the fall, board members were clear – they want a range of options, not universal mandates, so that their school districts can best meet the needs of their students and communities. They also, importantly, strongly support flexibility for schools in recovering from the learning challenges of remote instruction and preparing for a safe reopening.

We found that board members believe that families in their districts have been largely satisfied with online instruction. They overwhelmingly agree, however, that online learning is not an acceptable long-term alternative to face-to-face instruction.

SCSBA's survey produced a clear consensus on a range of questions. Overall, 80 percent of board members felt that a return to face-to-face teaching is imperative, although members in urban districts view online instruction more favorably than those in rural areas. Board members in rural districts listed lack of access to broadband internet as a major obstacle to instruction this spring, along with a greater need for one-on-one, in-person instruction for children in high-poverty areas.

Other members noted that students with special needs and those for whom English is a second language have also struggled with online instruction.

Internet access and meeting the specific needs of children in poverty are issues the state has needed to address for years. The pandemic—which has a potential to return—makes these needs even more pressing.

A vast majority of board members, particularly those in rural areas, also support suspending or reducing standardized testing given the difficulties remote instruction has posed for many students. However hard educators, parents and students have worked to stay on track while schools are closed, we know that there will be learning losses—some significant—to make up next school year. Educators need to use the coming school year to focus on student learning and not on end-of-the-year high stakes testing.

Board members support a wide range of alternatives, with state funding and flexibility in how options are implemented, for schools to choose from in readying students for the new year. These include extending the school day for extra learning time, reserving time at the beginning of the year to review instruction provided during Covid-19 closures and giving families the choice for their children to repeat a grade, among others.

Ensuring safety as school reopens is another area in which school leaders believe options are essential. The majority support split scheduling, in which students would physically attend school on certain days and learn from home on others. In smaller schools, as many board members pointed out, physical distancing would otherwise be impossible. Others are concerned that split scheduling would be logistically unworkable, vastly increase the burden on teachers and continue to hamper students who lack the benefits of Internet access and family help.

Other safety options many school leaders support include class size distancing, physical distancing on buses, and, overwhelmingly, better attention to health and hygiene in schools. Many believe parents should have the option to send students back to school or, in light of safety concerns, continue online or paper-based instruction from home.

As one board member wrote, “We are in a time when flexibility must be an option.” As all of us work at the massive task of managing education and continuing learning in a period of unprecedented disruption, we should remember what has always been true: every school is different, and every district is different. We should heed the voices of those who know them best.

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