

# NEW YORK STATE EQUITY FAMILY FELLOWS: FALL 2020 SCHOOL REOPENING RECOMMENDATIONS

## NEW YORK PARENTS SAY: “REOPEN SCHOOLS EQUITABLY.”

The disruptions caused by this spring’s abrupt school closures have tremendously impacted family life for parents and students. Parents and guardians have worked hard to juggle various demands. Many parents across the state have had to face the challenge of working full-time from home while caring for and teaching children. Other parents have lost employment and income and must continue to manage households, care for children, and serve as the primary teacher to their students — all at once.

Conventional narratives have often stated that “parents don’t care” or “parents are unresponsive.” However, four months ago, hundreds of thousands of parents across the state took on the responsibility of primary educators at home. Parents have unequivocally risen to the occasion, with varying levels of support and connection with their schools.

As policymakers decide about New York students’ return to school buildings, parents have ideas. Students have been exposed to dual pandemics — coronavirus and systemic racism. Parents consistently state that they are worried about their children falling behind academically, new school schedules, a new wave of school closures, and ensuring that they have a say in what happens with their children. Parents are a critical voice in the quest for educational equity.

Parent leaders from across New York State came together for three conversations about the components of an equitable school reopening in the fall of 2020. They discussed their hopes and fears in two virtual sessions. At a final meeting, parents presented these recommendations:

**1. BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT KEEPING STRONG TEACHERS.** As we look to reopen schools, school districts should prioritize retaining and supporting diverse teachers. Teachers of color make a significant impact on the education of all students, and especially Black and Brown children. Students deserve teachers who are strong, connected to the community, and reflective of the students’ cultural and ethnic identities. Schools and districts should be deliberate about celebrating teachers who are going above and beyond. Support teachers to support our children by equipping them with tools to manage trauma in the classroom and connecting our educators with community-based organizations that specialize in students’ needs.

**2. GIVE STUDENTS SCHEDULES THAT MAKE FAMILY LIFE MANAGEABLE.** One of the biggest adjustments families have had to make is finding and maintaining a balance between work and life amidst daily teaching responsibilities for their children. When students return to school, families



need schedules that account for children’s developmental stages, family needs, and contingencies if schools are closed again. Students entering school for the first time or who experienced school closures early in their educational experience require nurturing educational environments with an emphasis on appropriate socialization. Schedules should maximize in-person instruction. High-quality child care or enrichment should be available when students are not in traditional school settings. All provisions should be particularly attentive to students with special needs, especially those with disabilities and whose families need language translations.

**3. PRIORITIZE STUDENT WELLNESS AND ACADEMICS.** Now more than ever, students' overall well-being is paramount, meaning that schools must meet both students' academic and social-emotional needs. Students and their families are dealing with the emotional aftermath of COVID-19 and learning gaps. Teachers and school-based staff will have to support students when schools reopen. We parents demand the prioritization of student wellness in tandem with academic learning. Consider hiring trained therapists to be on-staff full-time to provide social-emotional support for students and their families. As expectations evolve, curricula should ensure high expectations and be flexible enough to accommodate students’ needs. For example, some students may benefit from having the option to finish assignments outside the allotted classroom time without penalization. Emotional health comes from a feeling of acceptance, acclimation, and accomplishment, and emotionally healthy students perform better academically. Social-emotional supports should be integrated into the school day and not treated as an added-on service.

**4. PREPARE FOR FUTURE SCHOOL CLOSURES.** Parenting during the pandemic has been a balancing act. Support parents by ensuring that there are clear guidelines that describe how students and educators will be prepared should school closures become necessary again. Guidance should have specific considerations for students with special needs, learning disabilities, or physical impairments. The digital divide is real, and tech equity should be a priority. Schools and districts should mitigate gaps in broadband access and provide teachers with training in teaching strategies and relevant software for blended or distance learning. In some cases, making use of school buildings or community centers ensures students can connect to the internet in a safe environment. Consider how underutilized school buildings can serve as hubs for neighborhoods — uniting families, educators, and community partners while providing students with opportunities for scholarship, health and social services, and enrichment.

**5. CONSIDER US AS PARTNERS.** Parents are the experts in what is best for their children and should be considered essential partners in developing policies that serve and impact their children. Parents want to help. Parents want to be engaged and are often best positioned to guide successful work in schools. School districts should include parents in decision-making during school reopening and in ongoing shifts. Effective and inclusive dialogue between schools and parents, in parents’ preferred language, should be the standard. Schools and school districts should leverage parent leadership as a meaningful part of the decision-making process.

