



At Our Core

Newtown Public Schools

Return to School Plan

Fall 2021

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Introduction

Following a return to school in the fall of 2020, staff and school leaders navigated immense challenges in an effort to provide educational services, both in-person and through remote learning, for more than 4,000 Newtown Public School students. Our district leadership teams continued to ensure all students had access to appropriate technology resources. Preparations were put in place to ensure the safety of students and staff, including a suite of mitigation strategies (e.g., social distancing, masks, hand washing, and sanitizing), recommended by the Department of Public Health (DPH) in alignment with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). When classroom instruction moved to remote learning, teachers coordinated instructional technology and digital resources so that both in-class and distance learners could access information, engage in activities, make connections, and receive ongoing support. As partners with the district, parents and caregivers turned kitchens, living rooms, and home offices into makeshift classrooms to support their children.

Throughout the pandemic, the Superintendent of Schools worked closely with the Newtown Director of Health to monitor local and State health metrics in order to assess the feasibility of various learning models (remote, hybrid, in-person). After moving between hybrid and remote learning, Newtown Public Schools moved to a full in-person model in January of 2021. While teaching and learning during a global pandemic prompted a plethora of educational changes, the commitment by staff, leaders, and caregivers to support students helped us maintain safe and productive learning environments.

Recently, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) reported that by April 30th nearly 82.7 Connecticut school districts were offering in-person instruction, and by the week of May 3-7 no district was fully remote. As health metrics continue to improve and the percentage of vaccinated individuals increases, Newtown Public Schools anticipates a return to full, in-person learning in the fall of 2021. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) has granted the State of Connecticut funding to ensure districts are given ample opportunity "...to develop bold, high-impact plans to address the substantial disruptions to student learning, interpersonal interactions, and social-emotional well-being."

The staff and leadership of Newtown Public Schools have learned many lessons from the challenges faced throughout the pandemic. While we are prepared to address learning gaps, we remain equally inspired to transform our practices so they continue to provide high-quality, innovative learning experiences for all students. Although our plan focuses on an in-person learning model, it may evolve based on health metrics and any future requirements by the State of Connecticut.



Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue
Superintendent of Schools

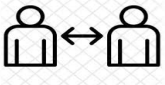
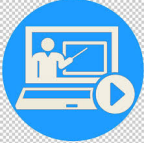




Planning for the Fall of 2021








Newtown Public Schools has strived to find a path toward safe, in-person learning as we approach the 2021-22 school year. There are five areas that Connecticut public school districts must consider when developing the Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan: **I. Health and Safety Strategies II. Continuity of Services III. Public Comment IV. Periodic Review Process V. Understandable and Uniform Format**



I. Health and Safety Strategies

The Newtown Public School's *Return to School* plan outlines our efforts to provide safe, in-person learning at all levels. The Newtown Board of Education adopted policies, including Policy 6172.61 Distance Learning and 6114.8 Emergencies and Disaster Preparedness to address remote learning, as well as health and safety protocols during the pandemic. We will continue to have discussions with our local health director and review guidance from the State DPH to monitor and adjust our health and safety practices as needed. As we return to school in the fall of 2021, we anticipate that COVID infection rates and trends in our local community and across the State of Connecticut will inform the evolution of our plan.

Health and Safety Strategies for In-Person Learning		
 In-person Learning	<p>As long as health metrics at the local level continue to improve, and without any new State mandates or executive orders in place, pre-K-12 will resume in-person learning with continuity of all services beginning August 2021.</p> <p>Cohort D will no longer be necessary as an option for families. Newtown Middle School and Newtown High School will no longer require daily early dismissal. All elementary schools, as well as Reed Intermediate School, will no longer require early dismissal on Wednesdays.</p>	✓
 Masks	<p>It is our on-going interest and intent to create and maintain an environment that is conducive to students' health and well-being. The current Executive Order 13A - Protection of Public Health and Safety During COVID-19 - authorizes the DPH to determine where masks are worn through September 30. Therefore, masks will be required by all students, staff, and adults on school buses and in schools regardless of vaccination status.</p>	✓

 <p>Social Distance</p>	<p>Newtown schools will encourage social distancing in accordance with recommendations from DPH and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).</p> <p>Desk shields will no longer be utilized.</p>	✓
 <p>Digital Learning</p>	<p>While remote learning (Cohort D) will not be offered in the fall, digital and blended learning opportunities will remain an integral part of instruction, when appropriate.</p>	✓
 <p>Cohorting</p>	<p>Classroom groups and/or clusters at the K-6 level serve as natural cohorts which will support contact tracing, as needed. Students at this level will travel to and from specials, lunch and recess as they had prior to COVID.</p> <p>Students in grades 7 through 12 will continue in non-cohorted classes, including lunch.</p>	✓
 <p>Lunch/ Cafeteria</p>	<p>All lunches will be served in the cafeteria, as health metrics permit, with physical distancing to the greatest extent possible. <i>Some classrooms may be used for lunches, if needed.</i> Adjustments may be made if required by the state of Connecticut.</p> <p>Cafeteria meals will continue to be provided to students at no cost until June 30, 2022.</p>	✓
 <p>Recess/ Outdoor Activities</p>	<p>Masks will not be required for any outdoor activities, including PE and recess. Teachers will be encouraged to utilize outdoor teaching spaces, as appropriate.</p> <p>Shared use of playground and PE equipment will be allowed and equipment will be periodically cleaned and disinfected.</p>	✓
 <p>Music and Art</p>	<p>Music, including choral and instrumental groups and ensembles, will be permitted to practice and perform following guidance issued by the State of Connecticut and National Association for Music Education (NAfME). Shared use of materials and equipment in art and unified arts will be allowed. Materials and equipment will be periodically cleaned and disinfected.</p>	✓

 <p>Athletics</p>	<p>Middle and high school sports will continue to follow CIAC guidelines for fall, winter and spring sports.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Clubs/Activities</p>	<p>All clubs and activities will resume in full this fall.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Training</p>	<p>All staff will receive ongoing professional development and training in any health safety protocols in place as required by the State of CT.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Illness</p>	<p>To continue to maintain a safe learning environment, parents and caregivers will need to keep students home when ill.</p> <p>Parents will need to inform the school nurse if students are out ill.</p> <p>Families and staff should notify the nurse if they (or their students) have had contact with someone who is positive for COVID-19.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Sanitization</p>	<p>All facilities will be cleaned and disinfected in accordance with DPH and CDC guidelines.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Ventilation</p>	<p>Enhancements have been made to existing HVAC systems to increase ventilation rates in accordance with State DPH guidelines. For schools and classrooms without HVAC systems, air purifiers with HEPA filters are in place.</p>	<p>✓</p>
 <p>Transportation</p>	<p>Transportation will resume at capacity. Masks are required on all public transportation in accordance with federal CDC guidelines.</p>	<p>✓</p>

 <p>Quarantining</p>	<p>We will continue to follow the DPH and CDC guidance regarding quarantine and isolation, currently requiring 7 days of quarantine (day 5 negative test). A direct contact for unvaccinated students is to be within 3 feet for 15 minutes or more. Vaccinated individuals will not be required to quarantine or isolate if asymptomatic. Only direct contacts will be notified.</p>	✓
 <p>Support for Quarantined Students</p>	<p>Students who are required to quarantine will be provided assignments through Google Classroom or use of Seesaw (asynchronous) and supported by an online tutor/mentor to maintain engagement in learning.</p>	✓
 <p>Covid Testing</p>	<p>We will continue to provide testing for school community members through our Newtown School-based Health Center located at Newtown Middle School.</p>	✓
 <p>Volunteers</p>	<p>Volunteers will be permitted to visit schools as long as health metrics allow.</p> <p>All volunteers will be required to wear a mask in school buildings and on buses.</p>	✓
 <p>Vaccination</p>	<p>We will continue to support the vaccination of staff and eligible students through our local Newtown Health Department and other community partners.</p>	✓
<p>Mental Health</p>	<p>Programs and services across the district, including counseling, mindfulness at the elementary and intermediate levels, SOS (Signs of Suicide), QPR training, Hope Squad, and Kids in Crisis at the secondary level, will continue to support students' mental health and well-being.</p>	✓

II. Continuity of Services

AccelerateCT

In a document developed by the CSDE - [AccelerateCT](#) - educators and leaders are encouraged to develop plans to return to school in 2021-22 that will "...promote renewal, reduce opportunity gaps, accelerate learning, and advance equity." AccelerateCT defines high impact practices each district should consider as they plan for the future:

- High-quality instruction with integrated digital tools and resources
- Multi-tiered system of instructional and behavioral supports
- Formative assessment process and progress monitoring
- Multiple means of demonstrating and assessing learning
- Multiple means of accessing learning
- Developing student agency
- Cultivating strong and supportive relationships with students and families

Newtown's District Strategic Plan

While safety is priority, our goals include supporting students academically, socially and emotionally in alignment with the beliefs, values, and expectations outlined in our District Strategic Plan. The high impact practices outlined by the State of Connecticut align well with the mission in Newtown's District Strategic Plan, which calls upon "a partnership of students, families, educators and community to **INSPIRE EACH STUDENT TO EXCEL** in attaining and applying the knowledge, skills and attributes that lead to personal success while becoming a contributing member of a dynamic global community."



Several key objectives in our current District Strategic Plan will continue to guide our collective efforts to improve, reimagine, and support the quality of educational services we provide our students:

Objective I: Each student will develop and consistently demonstrate college, career, and global readiness skills in...

- problem-solving,
- critical and creative thinking,
- collaboration, and
- written and verbal communication.

Objective II: Each student will develop and demonstrate necessary character attributes for personal well-being and to become contributing members of the local and global communities. These attributes include...

- social emotional wellness,
- positive behaviors,
- respect for diversity, and
- responsible digital citizenship.

Objective III: Each student will set and achieve personally challenging goals and demonstrate their learning through multiple modes in addition to formative and summative assessments of learning.

Student Assessment

Assessing student learning will be critical in the year ahead, especially as our efforts will be focused on supporting student learning and growth following a pandemic. In order to gauge what specific student deficits or gaps might exist for each learner, our educators and leaders will need to access data with immediacy and efficiency. Newtown Public Schools invested in **EduCLIMBER**, which combines a comprehensive assessment system and a real-time dashboard for educators. Our teacher leaders are in the process of being trained so they can support staff in the fall of 2021 to access student assessment data in order to make informed decisions about the supports that will address their academic and social-emotional needs.

Academic Programs and Pathways

Following the pandemic, Newtown Public Schools will provide a continuity of services, as well as implementing new and innovative programs and digital resources to support, enrich, and accelerate student learning. Students will continue to have multiple means of accessing learning and presenting their understandings. **Student choice and voice** will remain integral as we revise curriculum and plan for innovative instruction to engage learners. Through the Assistant Superintendent's office, a student advisory council will help in reviewing curricular changes that support a multicultural view. Student agency is a priority and will allow for **meaningful, relevant, and engaging resources** to promote conceptual understanding and transfer of learning.

The collective efforts of staff, leaders, and members of the community will have a positive influence on the quality of Newton's educational system in the years ahead. While the natural inclination might be to focus solely on learning loss caused by the pandemic, a greater opportunity exists to capitalize on the valuable qualities that currently exist in our school community and work creatively to **inspire, nurture, support, and accelerate learning across all grade levels.**

New K-5 Math Program

The inclusion of a **new K-5 math program** in the coming year, which includes a greater foundation for problem solving and digital resources, will more effectively address struggling math learners. After a review of NWEA and other data, math was the area that showed a more significant deficit over the last year due to school closure. Over the course of the 2020-21 school year, several math programs were piloted to improve math instruction for our students, not only as a result of COVID and interruptions to learning, but to address struggling learners who will benefit from a more engaging, hands-on program that supports problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

The **Bridges** program was selected and will be implemented in the fall of 2021. In addition to our new math program, we are also including additional math interventionists at each of our elementary schools to support math learners who might need more focused attention on math skills and concepts. Similarly, a pilot will begin for a new math program at the 6-8 level that will provide a consistent transition to support learners as they move to middle school.

Blended Learning

As AccelerateCT clearly defines, high-quality instruction with integrated digital tools and resources is important for advancing learning. Although we know that in-person learning is the most effective model, we also firmly believe that students' interactions with online resources are engaging and beneficial for learning. Blended learning combines digital resources and opportunities for online learning with in-person instruction. During the pandemic, we worked to ensure that all students had access to technology (Chromebooks) and purchased resources for digital learning that would support classroom instruction, such as IXL, Rosetta Stone, Ed Puzzle, Newsela, and Everyday Speech.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

The inclusion of staff to provide deliberate, ongoing tiered support through the Scientific Research-based Intervention (SRBI) process will help to address learning loss due to COVID. Through formative and summative assessments of student learning, students with deficits will be identified and provided deliberate, frequent assistance and progress monitoring. SRBI teams exist at each building to review data, identify students and provide Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). These systems of support include added assistance in the classroom setting, small group instruction, and/or individualized attention to meet their unique academic needs.

Social-Emotional Learning

The landscape of teaching and learning has changed following school closure and the impact that had on our students. While we anticipate students returning in the fall with both learning and social-emotional challenges, staff and leaders in Newtown Public Schools are well-prepared to support their needs. Students who exhibit emotional concerns will be identified and receive appropriate services. While much of this is a natural part of our existing approaches to support our students, the inclusion of additional support service staff for the 2021-22 school year will allow for individualized, meaningful, and appropriate mental health services for our students.

Our **social-emotional learning (SEL) programs** are based on the tenets of [CASEL](#). All schools continue to model mindfulness at each school. Mindfulness rooms are set up at the elementary level to create calming spaces that help students deal with emotions that negatively interfere with learning.

Behavioral Interventionists (trained paraprofessionals) are in place at all our elementary schools. These paras work with students who exhibit challenging behaviors in the classroom. Our Second Step program in K-8 will continue and is evidence-based to promote social and emotional growth. Students learn to confront conflicts, deal with social-emotional issues, employ strategies to reduce stress, show respect for others, and develop skills for their health and wellness. Programs in 7-12 include advisory periods and Project Adventure as a means of facilitating students' growth in problem-solving, dealing with emotional concerns, peer relationships, collaboration and leadership.

Members of PEAC (Parent Educator Advisory Council) in the *Partnerships* subgroup developed an after-school social-emotional program for students at the elementary level. This was piloted during the pandemic and facilitated by paraprofessionals. Elementary students had an opportunity to meet with their peers virtually from across the district to enjoy online games and activities to mitigate isolation and help students meet new friends. This program was so successful that it will be continued as an "in-person" program after school during the 2021-22 school year.

Mental Health

Newtown's SOS (signs of suicide) program will continue to help identify at-risk students, along with student behaviors identified through counselors and staff. We have acquired funding for a **Kids in Crisis** counselor at our middle school to support at-risk students during school and through a 24-hour hotline/facility. The *Kids in Crisis* program is currently in place at the high school and will now be extended down for our younger adolescents as we anticipate increased issues with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations - some of which may be an outcome of the pandemic.

The inclusion of our **Hope Squad** program next year at the high school will provide a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program. Students are trained by an advisor to be aware of their peers and watch for warning signs of suicide. Stated in the core values of Hope Squad, "Students learn to show empathy toward their peers, listen without judgment, and reduce the stigma regarding help-seeking and mental illness."

Staff Wellness

Staff wellness is equally important to us. We encourage staff health and wellness, which includes professional development activities and mental health resources. During a professional development day in April of 2021, the afternoon was deliberately designed for K-12 staff to engage in healthy, stress-reducing activities to support their mental health and well being. Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) will continue to support all employees who might need outside support for a variety of mental health needs.

Meeting the Needs of Special Education and ESL Students

The inclusion of a **new co-teaching model** at the middle school will provide greater support for students during classroom instruction. Currently, the co-teaching model only exists at the high school level. In light of increased academic needs for students with disabilities, the need for support before, during, and following direct instruction is critical. Many students have been on remote learning, and others have had modified services as a result. This will help address learning gaps that are now more prevalent.

Additional special education services have been added, including social workers, teachers, and school psychologists in areas where we have identified growing needs as a result of the pandemic. For example, we have added an additional teacher at Middle Gate Elementary and increased social worker services at Reed Intermediate.

We have also included an additional teacher for our district **ESL program** to support students with language needs. Not only is this a growing population, but our ESL students will need further attention and support as a result of the pandemic. Adequate staffing will allow more individualized attention for students K-12, and the addition of resources such as Rosetta Stone will serve to support English language learners in the future.

Coordinator of Equity and Inclusion

Through private funding, Newtown Public Schools is in the process of hiring a qualified individual to work with staff, students, and families in the ongoing refinement and maintenance of safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environments across the district. In April, a bullying survey for staff, students, and families was sent out as a part of field research conducted by members of John Jay College and Newtown Public Schools. Following that survey, a similar survey for elementary staff and families was developed to provide a clear and comprehensive picture of issues impacting the climate and culture of our schools. Using this data, as well as previous information and stories shared by families, students, and alumni, Newtown Public Schools determined that a priority was ensuring all students felt a sense of belonging and safety as valued members of our school community.

Parent Communication and Partnerships

Throughout the last 18 months, our goal has been to communicate frequently with parents and caregivers. During the pandemic, and as we moved between learning models (in-person, hybrid, and remote), it was important for parents to remain connected to staff and leaders as their partnership in helping with remote learning at home was key to student success. Through PEAC (Parent Educator Advisory Council), staff and parents in the Branding & Communication subgroup began to explore more effective and efficient platforms. In the fall of 2021, the district will launch **Blackboard**, which will replace our current system through School Messenger. Using an app, parents and staff will have access to all current school information, websites, and communication tools using their phone or other devices.

III. Public Comment

Stakeholder feedback is important to Newtown Public School staff, leadership, and Board of Education members. From the inception of the Re-Entry Plan developed for the 2020-21 school year, parents and community members have been given ample opportunities to voice their opinions, provide perspectives, and offer feedback. We continue to utilize Board of Education meetings as a conduit to the general public, but also provide other opportunities for stakeholders to share input.

A recent open-ended survey (in May) was sent to all stakeholders to receive comments regarding our return to school in the 2021-22 school year. Responses included themes around in-person learning, health metrics, safety, and mitigation strategies such as masks.

Additionally, the Superintendent of Schools meets with groups of parents in Google Meets and Zoom meetings to discuss and offer clarity around COVID health and safety measures, academic, social/emotional learning, or potential changes anticipated for the upcoming 2021-22 school year. PTA President meetings, PEAC (Parent Educator Advisory Council), NFT Union meetings, Teacher Forums and Culture and Climate meetings will continue to provide opportunities to engage stakeholders and allow for open discussion and public comment.

Summaries of committee and BOE meeting notes, as well as survey input, will be posted on the Newtown Public Schools district website to provide transparency and clarity.

IV. Periodic Review Process

Districts are required to periodically review and, as appropriate, revise their Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan at least every six months through September 30, 2023. Each review must include seeking public comment on the plan and developing the plan after taking into account the public comment.

Below are the dates that districts must submit a refreshed or updated plan to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) via eGMS. The review dates are as follows:

- June 23, 2021
- December 23, 2021
- June 23, 2022
- December 23, 2022

V. Understandable and Uniform Format

Newtown Public Schools will utilize the current template and make it accessible to the public. The plan will be posted and accommodations made for those who require formats related to language or disabilities. Our plan will be to continue to revise our plan as health metrics, State mandates, and guidance evolves. Thus, we expect aspects of our plan to be revised even prior to the above dates, and will consider not only State guidance but community input as well.