



NATIONAL CATHOLIC
REGISTER

Catholic Schools Plan to Open for Fall Classes Amid Pandemic's Uncertainties

Susan Klemond

July 24, 2020

Despite continued uncertainty over COVID-19, Catholic schools across the country are moving forward with plans to welcome students for in-person instruction this fall that will involve stringent safety protocols and continued options for virtual learning.

Though cases of the novel coronavirus continue to increase, especially in some Southern states, some families surveyed this summer told the Register they still feel connected to their Catholic school community and want to bring their children back to school in the fall.

While dioceses and schools face different challenges in reopening, many are preparing a variety of learning options: in-person, remote and a hybrid of the two. At the same time, they're consulting with local health officials and other government officials about how to modify and maintain school buildings to keep students and staff safe.

As school leaders prepare to open their doors, COVID-19 case stats, local government restrictions and federal guidelines and economic aid are all in flux.

"It's contingency upon contingency upon contingency," said Kevin Baxter, chief innovation officer at the Arlington, Virginia-based National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), which provides professional development, formation, leadership and advocacy to Catholic school communities. "Trying to plan for something that might not ever happen. ... I would argue that Catholic schools are really well adapted for this because they can be flexible. They're creative. They're innovative."

Beginning in late February through the spring semester, school buildings in 48 states, four U.S. territories, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity were closed for the remainder of the academic year, according to *Education Week*.

As of July 20, at least 22 dioceses nationwide had announced resumption of in-person instruction for the fall. There are roughly 6,200 U.S. Catholic elementary and secondary schools, according to NCEA.

President Donald Trump in July advocated for the reopening of schools, citing the declining COVID-19 mortality rate and the virus' less severe impact on young people.

However, beginning around Memorial Day, Sunbelt states, especially Florida, Texas, California, Arizona and North and South Carolina, experienced a surge in coronavirus cases.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced on July 17 that public and private schools would not be allowed to offer in-person instruction this fall until their counties stabilize COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles' Catholic schools had been prepared to return to in-person instruction before the announcement.

“Naturally, we are disappointed,” said Paul Escala, senior director and superintendent for the archdiocese. “This announcement is a setback for all children who have been out of school for nearly five months. Our state must prioritize the return of in-person instruction ahead of other sectors.”

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., commented on Newsom's action on Twitter: “@GavinNewsom encouraged mass protests. Now, he's forcing private schools to stay closed, even if they could open safely. Closing Catholic & other religious schools while encouraging mass protests isn't science — it's a violation of the 1st Amendment.”

Texas Exempts Private Schools

The day Newsom made his announcement, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton stated in a letter that private schools, including Catholic schools, are exempt from following local health restrictions regarding school reopening.

Under Texas Gov. Greg Abbot's orders, local governments are prohibited from closing religious institutions or dictating mitigation strategies to them, he wrote. They also are prohibited from “issuing blanket orders closing religious private schools.”

Religious private schools are protected by the First Amendment and Texas law, and “schools may continue to determine when it is safe for their communities to resume in-person instruction free from any government mandate or interference,” Paxton wrote.

In international studies, children appear less likely to get the COVID-19 infection, and fewer children seem to have the infection in the community, but results are not yet conclusive, according to researchers Alasdair Munro & Damian Roland. An April study from Iceland showed that children who are infected are less likely than adults to infect others.

In reopening schools, there is concern about the health of teachers, especially those in high-risk categories, Baxter said. But concerns can be mitigated on a case-by-case basis, he said.

Many parents, especially those working at home during the shutdown, want their children to return to school, Baxter said.

“There was a real appreciation for what it takes to be an effective teacher, and so I think that could be a blessing that comes out of this on the other end ... a respect and appreciation for what teachers bring to the classroom.”

Ideally, the decision to reopen would involve bishops, superintendents and local authorities, said Baxter, adding, “The entity that diocese schools really listen to are health departments at the local level,” he said.

Balanced Approach

As dioceses chart their course through the uncertainties, they have done so with wide consultation. Some have assigned the challenges of reopening to dedicated task forces.

School leaders, local and state officials and health-care providers have participated in discussions about reopening the Archdiocese of New Orleans Catholic schools, said Superintendent RaeNell Houston, who planned to announce the decision about opening the week of July 20.

“The health and safety of our students and of our educators is paramount, and it needs to be balanced with what is best for our children,” said Executive Director Mary Pat Donoghue of the Secretariat of Catholic Education for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Because the coronavirus pandemic is hitting communities differently, the decisions on opening have to be made at the local level by the local bishop, in consultation with his pastors; and they, in turn, with their principals, to determine the best approach for each school community.”

The emphasis on community and subsidiarity “have allowed Catholic schools to deftly move from an in-person to a virtual learning environment,” she said. “This same commitment to the formation of each child, and the flexibility that comes with local governance, will allow each community to make the best decision regarding the reopening of schools.”

Catholic schools are resilient communities of faith, with families, staff and stakeholders committed to each other and supporting students, Escala said. “Our ability to operate outside of government control, notwithstanding this recent [Newsom] decision, creates a great level of autonomy which allows us to come up with flexible schedules, for example, to accommodate health protocols and family needs.”

Catholic schools are flexible because they’re smaller than public schools, and they’re not unionized, said Thomas Carroll, superintendent of the Archdiocese of Boston’s Catholic schools. “The ability to constantly recalibrate is an advantage that we have, because every time we have to recalibrate, we don’t have to sit down and have a union negotiation,” he said.

Various Options

Dioceses and schools are also deciding how to offer instruction.

The remote option of livestreamed classes will continue to be necessary when schools open because some parents will prefer to keep their children at home and because students who are sick or under quarantine will need a remote option, Carroll said.

New Orleans plans for remote and hybrid options, where kids are in class on different days, because the Louisiana Department of Education and Louisiana Department of Health allow a maximum of 10 in a classroom during some phases of their guidelines, Houston said.

In preparing for reopening, dioceses follow state and local health departments. Other resources the USCCB references include Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the surgeon general of the United States and the U.S. Department of Education, as well as Leading With Hope from the Greeley Center for Catholic Education, Donoghue said.

Health-and-safety guidelines include mask wearing for teachers and students, physical distancing and desk spacing of 6 feet, temperature screening, hand washing and sanitizing, and isolation space for students with coronavirus symptoms.

At Boston's Catholic schools, children younger than second grade won't be required to wear masks, Carroll said.

Students in some schools will be assigned to a cohort, a group of students who will learn together in the same room throughout the day. Carroll requested an exception for high-school students, whom he said need the ability to change classes.

Other guidelines involve cleaning protocols, repurposing communal spaces for classroom use, concerns about building capacity, ventilation and food preparation.

Funding Debate

The new protocols come at a time when Catholic schools, parishes and dioceses have had limited fundraising capacity and drastically reduced collections at Sunday Masses due to pandemic restrictions on gatherings. According to the [Cato Institute](#), 90 Catholic schools have closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Catholic and other private schools across the country hope to receive some of the \$13.2 billion in emergency funding for public and private schools from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The funds are designated for costs such as cleaning, equipment for protecting student and teacher health, teacher training in remote instruction and distance-education tools.

Five states are suing the U.S. government over the private-school funding allocation, arguing that it would divert funds from the poorest public-school districts.

Pending outcome of the litigation, Los Angeles Catholic Schools hope to receive CARES funds to purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Escala said. "Otherwise, we are fundraising for the acquisition of PPE for our poorest schools, while other schools are using their own operating funds."

CARES funds should be given on a per-pupil basis because COVID-19 shut all schools down, Baxter said. "Advocating this is like a natural disaster," he said. "When federal aid comes in, it never structures one population over another."

New Orleans schools will receive CARES Act funds and other community resource for their reopening costs, Houston said.

Baxter cited the economic impact of the shutdown, the permanent closure of schools and the impact on families paying tuition.

Though some Catholic schools have closed permanently, others have seen more public-school students asking about enrolling.

‘Constantly Evolving’

Some public-school families will switch to Catholic school if public schools have limited in-person classes, Carroll predicted. Among Boston Catholic school students, enrollment and tuition are like last year, but parents remain cautious, he said.

This summer Houston has noticed more inquiries about New Orleans Catholic schools.

“Many commented that they were unhappy with their public-school district’s handling of remote instruction during the spring school closures,” she said.

Catholic school leaders continue to navigate the uncharted territory of a new school year during the pandemic, but equipped with flexibility, creativity and a detailed plan.

Houston said, “This is a complicated situation, and it is constantly evolving.”