



School in the Time of COVID-19

By Karen Echeverria, ISBA Executive Director

COVID-19 has completely upended our lives as we knew them. It has closed schools and office buildings. It has made a once-simple task like grocery shopping into an intimidating chore. It has felt isolating – spending weeks and months away from family members and friends. It is continuing to take its toll on the economy. It has divided political leaders. Members of our community are dying.

Historians say there are two types of endings to pandemics: the medical, which occurs when the infection and death rates plummet; and the social, when the epidemic of fear *about* the disease wanes.

One particularly troubling aspect of this pandemic is the open-endedness of it. While it helps to acknowledge that this *is* a temporary state, and soon (hopefully) we can get back to a sense of normality, it is going to take a cooperative effort to wrap our heads around the next steps.

I know next to nothing about epidemiology or economic forecasting, but I do know a fair bit about public schools and the impact on them. Everyone who works in or has a child in a public school knows that the impact has been *enormous*.

A Well Deserved Round of Applause to School Leaders, Teachers, Parents, and Students

The Sunday after the first confirmed COVID-19 case was announced was a day most of us in education will never forget. As Governor Little and public health experts urged schools to stay open if they could, school leaders agonized over the logistical, political, economic, and social effects of keeping their schools open. Schools are more than just centers for learning, and many children rely on them as a place to eat a meal or receive other services critical to the child's well-being. Every brick-and-mortar school had to turn on a dime to ensure they were continuing to provide their services to students evenhandedly. Despite the mountain of hurdles ahead of them – and without claiming that every system is perfect – I have been awe-inspired at how adaptable school board members, administrators, teachers and school staff, parents, and (most importantly) students have had to become during this crisis. You all deserve the utmost appreciation for how we have weathered these last couple of months.

We Are Still Adapting, Too.

We know there are still frustrations, and over the interim, every district and school will be looking at ways to improve these systems. Meanwhile, there are still clouds of uncertainty that loom over us – some not yet realized. The concept of keeping a “safe physical distance” between students contrasts to how a typical school community operates. For example, a standard school bus seats 81 schoolchildren, but with the CDC guidelines of maintaining six feet of physical distance, only 12. School meals will likely look different, as there is increased risk associated

with assembled feeding areas. Passing periods in hallways, student drop-off/pick-up areas, student common areas – all things that will likely look different as we look toward the fall. It is very possible that at-home digital learning days will still take place in your school or district come August—both to accommodate for safe physical distancing and the extensive cleaning protocols that must take place in between each day. This also means now is the time for State or Federal investment into broadband access, which many students in Idaho don't have direct access to.

I do not intend to cause superfluous panic. Instead my hope is to provide insight on what school leaders are trying to grapple with as they look ahead to opening their doors to the children in their community.

Political leaders are already extremely aware that school districts and charter schools are going to require fiscal support in order to adjust to a new world that we are all navigating, not unlike other organizations or businesses. Instead of outlining the creative ways in which policymakers could support their schools financially, I instead plead for patience and understanding as each school creates and introduces new protocols for how school will be able to resume for the most precious of Idaho's citizens.

The Elephant in the Room – Doing More with Less

Last week, Governor Little issued a memo outlining his budget reductions to schools and districts. The Governor's top priority is education, which is why the **only** piece of policy he introduced in the 2020 Legislative Session would allocate nearly \$223 million into teacher salaries over the next five years and is supported by Education stakeholders and Idaho's business leaders alike. To have to delay implementation on that plan, along with any holdback on a school budget, is one of the many bitter pills we have had to swallow throughout this pandemic. For weeks leading up to the both the 1% and 5% holdback plans, the Governor's office gathered education leaders and stakeholders to gather feedback and thoughtfully discuss the economic realities Idaho may face.

At the end of the day, K-12 Schools are not immune to the economic uncertainty that the rest of the country and world is facing. We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge and show thanks for the Governor's office for their transparency in this process. Even with State Rainy Day funds and monies [distributed through the CARES Act](#), some district and school budgets will still fall short. Schools will be strapped to provide *more* with even *less* resources. Districts and schools will need to dip into their reserves to keep afloat, and cuts to programs or staff may be an unfortunate reality associated with a lack of resources. We know that K-12 schools are not alone, as we watch small businesses, universities, and other state agencies face the same economic uncertainties.

It Has Never Been More Important to Work Cooperatively

In times of crisis, a threat can become a method for unification, and cooperation is the secret ingredient. The School Community Team – school board members, administrators, teachers, school staff, parents, patrons, lawmakers, and students – can overcome these challenges ahead of us. Without cooperation, there is little to no chance of defeating the threat, but cooperation can help *overcome* the threat.

We are truly all in this together, and our success or failure depends upon our ability to put aside differences and work together.

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