

UFT Elementary Division Focus Group Report

June 2020



United Federation of Teachers

A Union of Professionals

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Introduction

New York City shuttered public schools in mid-March 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, our 1.1 million students were no longer physically attending school. Just as suddenly, educators took on the herculean task of moving, in less than a week, from teaching and supporting learning in our classrooms to providing remote instruction through multiple digital platforms. It was a task undertaken in an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, sorrow and sadness.

Teachers and students were no longer able to physically interact. All were adjusting to virtual classes, and many students were waiting for the city Department of Education (DOE) to distribute 300,000 iPads. Unfortunately, this happened as communities simultaneously dealt with:

- An exponential rise in COVID-19 cases (ultimately reaching more than 210,000).
- A record number of deaths.
- Unprecedented negative impacts on the workforce, including loss of employment.
- Unfamiliar quarantining and social distancing protocols.

As we move forward in a COVID-19 world, we must look back at what we have accomplished and use the lessons learned as a foundation for reopening our schools. As this pandemic highlights long-term inequities within communities of color, educators work to overcome the barriers that result, such as lack of access to technology and mental health supports. We remain tenacious in our quest to support our students and their families academically — with standards-based instruction — and emotionally, while acquiring the skills needed to do so effectively.

With New York City the epicenter of the coronavirus, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) recognized the need to shift our communication and collaboration with members to a virtual platform. The Elementary Schools Division formed a focus group of educators from grades 3K- 5. The UFT Elementary Schools Focus Group met virtually for several weeks to discuss:

- Challenges and successes of remote learning.
- Professional development in response to the new virtual environment.
- Design for a blended model for school reopening. (In the rest of this report, we will call it a blended model.)

As elementary school educators, our goal is to create an equitable school system that supports our younger learners, is developmentally appropriate, ensures students feel seen, educates the whole child, recognizes that social-emotional learning matters, provides the tools and resources our educators need to be successful, and views families as allies.

Nothing replaces in-person teaching. Parents, educators and our focus group all agree. However, the current data on the trajectory of the coronavirus and the effectiveness of face covering and social distancing, rule out fully attended schools in September. In order to recommend a blended model that will enable schools to safely reopen in September, we will need to:

1. Find ways to address the obstacles presented by this very contagious virus.
2. Meet the guidelines suggested by the federal Centers for Disease Control, our state and local health departments and the city DOE.

This focus group report, with discussion topics and recommendations, includes the following sections:

- Reopening.
- Social-Emotional Learning.
- Health and Safety.
- Instruction.
- Professional Learnings Needed for the Upcoming School Year.
- Cost Considerations.

Reopening

Taking into account that the school system cannot reopen with fully staffed buildings and all enrolled students attending, there are three options for the upcoming school year:

1. The school system can continue remote learning.
 2. There can be a full return to our school buildings.
 3. Schools can use a blended model that offers both in-person and remote learning. Due to health concerns, we propose a blended model where students alternate between attending school and remote learning.
- Our focus group agrees that students should have at least two teachers, an in-person teacher and a remote teacher. Teachers should not be responsible for teaching both in person and remotely.

- A variety of in-person and remote cohorts were discussed. Because of the vastness and diversity of NYC schools, particular designs for cohorts may meet one school's needs better than another's.
- Students can attend a week in the school building and then a week learning remotely in a cohort design called the A week/B week design.
- When A week/B week is not selected, the committee would like to recommend AA/BB, with a day for professional learning and common planning time for remote and in-person colleagues to collaborate. This cohort design consists of two days of in-person instruction and three days of remote learning each week.

Social-Emotional Learning

We must emphasize up front that every school should have a social-emotional learning plan in place when doors physically and virtually open for the 2020-21 school year. Fear and trauma pose barriers to learning and thriving in school.

Current brain science proves psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It states that it is virtually impossible for any substantive learning to take place if a student's physiological and social-emotional needs are not met. The fear of an illness and/or death affecting families, as well as job loss, the stress of a family being in close quarters for a prolonged period of time with very little respite, food insecurity and, now, social unrest all provide an environment of instability for our students.

These are troubling times in our country as we contend with a global pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and countless other people of color, and the ongoing injustices faced by the Black community. Because we are in a digital world, these images are flashed before our children constantly, feeding them a diet of violence and fear. The trauma of witnessing racial violence further compounds our children's Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES).

Social-emotional learning is paramount for setting the stage for instruction when in-person classes resume. Our students and educators have experienced challenges that some have termed COVID post-traumatic stress disorder. Every school should have a social-emotional learning plan in place that includes, but is not limited to, the Positive Learning Collaborative (PLC), RULER by Marc Brackett, Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Schools (TCIS), mindfulness or yoga/movement.

While we are familiar with the term "achievement gap," we will have a "COVID gap" when school resumes for a host of reasons. Even with our earnestness to jump in and begin teaching academic subjects, we must make time for social-emotional learning. There must be an emphasis on team building, storytelling and creating spaces where students can share.

The damage of removing PE and recess while necessary in some cases is detrimental to our students. The children getting a movement period with the general education

teacher every single day could minimize this damage. In order to avoid an increase in behavioral, sensory, and problematic behaviors we need to include a mandatory structured movement break of 10 minutes into each 50 minutes of instruction time. This enables learners to maintain focus, integrate learning across both the brain's hemispheres, enter information into the memory, and avoid feeling overwhelmed or information overload. It has also shown that regular movement helps all children regulate themselves and therefore has been shown to decrease behavioral problems and tantrums.

Health and Safety

In order to fulfill our commitment to the safety of children and families, we must follow all CDC, state and local health department protocols. This is the priority for any reopening plan. As we gather more knowledge about this virus and its impact on children and adults, we suggest the following:

Staffing and health care procedures

- Have a nurse on staff in every school.
- Create procedures for students or staff who are ill.
- Use additional personnel to assist in common areas.

Cleaning and protective gear protocols

- Enhance cleaning, disinfecting and sanitizing protocols for all school buildings.
- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) in all buildings (i.e., protective clothing, gloves, masks, face shields, eyeglasses).
- Establish a thorough cleaning protocol in which items are cleaned at the start and the end of each day.
- Have equipment in all buildings to screen, disinfect and sanitize (i.e., thermometers, hand sanitizer, bleach, disinfectant wipes).
- Supply teachers with a bleach/water solution to spray down desks.

Social distancing measures for instruction

- Reduce group sizes.
- Practice social distancing for instruction.
- Consider how to distance students based on the placement of tables and/or desks.

- Serve breakfast and lunch in the classroom to maintain social distance and limit movement.
- Prohibit students from sharing common items. All classroom supplies should be personalized for continued use.
- Require children to wash their hands periodically; Use hand sanitizer when there are no sinks in the classroom.
- Sit in rows.
- During Whole Group instruction (i.e., Read Alouds, Mini Lessons) teachers circulate by going up and down rows.
- Consider how to distance students based on the placement of tables and/or desks.
- Sit on assigned spaces using visual tools such as plastic mats, Hula Hoops, pool noodles, etc.

Social distancing measures for bathroom visits

- Designate the flow in indoor spaces (i.e., directional arrows taped on the floor and posted in halls, spots marking off 6 feet of distance to assist in lineup, etc.).
- Consider using ropes like those used in early childhood to teach safe distance.
- Schedule bathroom time, possibly based on floor (i.e., first floor then second floor, etc. Keep in mind children need to use the facilities on demand, in addition to your scheduled time.)

Scheduling and student movement protocols

- Create protocols for entering buildings, including temperature checks.
- Plan arrival and dismissal at key locations. Utilize all exits and the four corners of the school.
- Stagger schedules and dismissals. To lessen schoolyard interactions, students should use dedicated stairwells to reach their classrooms.
- Maximize use of outside spaces and all indoor rooms.
- Minimize movement throughout the school building, with teachers instead of students traveling to different classes.
- Focus on contactless and safe dismissals (i.e., children line up by class, teacher acknowledges caretaker and child walks independently to caretaker).
- Stagger entrances and exits to promote social distancing.
- Hold outside dismissal, weather permitting.

Miscellaneous measures

- Conduct business in the main office when necessary. To the extent possible, continue to engage in virtual meetings.
- Limit parental movement throughout the school building.

Instruction

Ideally, students should be allowed to interact with their peers and receive instruction in a manner that is not restrictive. At this time, we must make modifications that support students' learning while meeting the developmental requirements for them to learn effectively. Therefore we suggest:

- In all the blended models, there needs to be an **in-person teacher and a teacher who facilitates remote learning**. The teachers should plan together. Their collaboration would allow for instruction to be seamless. Their ongoing communication should include: specific content that was covered, lessons and aspects of lessons that may need to be retaught, outlining the next steps.
- Most new content should be taught in person and expounded upon in the remote setting.
- It must be determined whether instructional tools and strategies can be used with fidelity in a remote setting. Some, including running records and baseline assessments, cannot.
- The more hands-on standards, such as those with measurement of angles or fractions, should be taught in person. There is some difficulty with remote math instruction for upper elementary grades due to the use of keyboards.

3K-Grade 2

Previously mentioned blended cohort designs “A Week/B Week” or “AA/BB weeks” for in-person attendance are recommended. We understand that socialization is the goal in the early-childhood classroom. Therefore, alternating days — “ABABA days” and/or “AM/PM session” half days — may be best. We recognize that this is neither conducive to arranging childcare when children are not in school, nor convenient for many working parents.

In our 3K and pre-K classrooms, relationship building is key with our youngest learners. We recommend that their first few days of school be virtual so their teachers and paraprofessionals can make an e-introduction before the first in-person school day, which can be quite traumatic for our youngest learners. Attending virtually for the first week will allow students to virtually see their teachers, hear about the exciting events awaiting them and create a culture for learning even before they set foot in a classroom.

For our younger learners, it is important to establish a culture that encourages them to take risks, explore, promote curiosity and questioning, as well as create an environment of trust. These prerequisites need to be at the forefront of all that we do. Creating a YES classroom environment may be more difficult, but it is still important, even as we look at our practice through a Covid-19 lens.

It is imperative to define what we mean by a YES environment. A YES environment does not mean we never say no or don't correct unsafe behaviors. It does mean all behavior is viewed through a safety lens and only those actions that are detrimental to health and safety are not allowed. This ensures that we minimize behavior problems that arise from too many "NOs." It provides a positive environment for the children to explore and learn while creating the parameters for safety. Read the [NAEYC article on creating a YES environment](#) for a deeper dive on this learning approach.

Our youngest learners do not have the cognitive skills to know how to truly social distance. A variety of tools and strategies are needed, including PPE for adults, safe storage of soiled materials, masks, and sanitizing materials for students. Special considerations for this population are:

- Students constantly put things in their mouths, so redirect behavior and place soiled objects in a secure area to be cleaned and sanitized.
- Students should have personalized supplies.
- Students cannot share mats or other common items. Mats must be personally assigned and must be cleaned and sanitized.
- Nap time may need to be eliminated. If not, families will need to provide additional sheets, and custodians must clean the cots.
- Material for bedding, plus gloves and toilet training items are required.
- Guidance is needed for classroom movement.
- Circle time can maintain some sense of normalcy with extra space between students.
- Plastic table mats or Hula Hoops, which are easy to clean, should be used instead of carpet squares. Spacing out chairs is another option.
- Ropes can help teach social distancing.
- Investment in [book bag/seat keeper](#) to store students' items. Bins for books, folders and notebooks should be eliminated.
- Cubbies must be managed; Maintain spacing by utilizing only every other cubby.
- An "X" on the floor is a way to denote spacing.
- Number of seats at a table should be limited because students are inclined to stay close to each other. Also, a number of students at a center or in an area should be reduced.

Grades 3-5

Developmentally, some upper elementary students may be able to socially distance and understand the need for the change in school protocols. However, it is important to remember that some children may not be mature enough to process all the changes. Cognitively, many may be comfortable with the changes. Others may need the supports mentioned in the 3K- Grade 2 section.

The social features of this age group, in which deep friendships are developing and relationships are the basis of the students' security, demand we pay attention to students' safety by explaining the whys of social distancing, reduced movement throughout the school, new cafeteria procedures and other behaviors. Many students may not have the executive functions to manage the many restrictions now placed on them.

We must be cognizant of the students' need for movement and integrate it frequently within the day in a safe manner. We also need to be patient, knowing the limits of their reasoning capacity, which may force them to ignore the consequences of their actions and become frustrated by the limitations.

Recommended Technology		
Multidisciplinary	ELA:	MATH
Screencastify	Get Epic	Sum Dog
FlipGrid	MyOn	Zearn
Zoom , Microsoft Teams , Google Meets	RAZ Kids	MathLearningCenter.org
eSpark Learning	Book Creator	enVisionMath
Safe You Tube	Reading Bear ***	Dream Box
Brain Pop	Phonics Hero ***	Happy Numbers
Freckle Education ***	No Red Ink	
Imagine Learning	NewsELA	
EdPuzzle	ReadWorks	
Kami		
IXL		
Jamboard		

Seesaw		
Peardeck		
Padlet		
GoNoodle		

*** Indicates phonics component

Professional Learning: What's Needed for the Upcoming School Year

Educators should be provided with quality and relevant professional learning, especially because we will have some teachers working in-person and others working remotely. To ensure there is synergy, collaboration and responsiveness to our current situation, we are recommending the following topics for professional learning:

- Experiencing Trauma During a Pandemic.
- Implementing Culturally Informed Practices (e.g. "I Am George Floyd," or I Am Breonna Tayler).
- Effectively Using Google Tools for Instruction.
- Building Classroom Culture and Routines with a Health and Safety Lens.
- Weaving Social-Emotional Learning into In-Person and Virtual Instruction.
- Discovering Best (ELA, math, etc.) Practices for Engaging Students During Remote Instruction.
- Creating the Collaborative Classroom with the In-Person and Remote Teacher.
- Understanding Our New Normal: Parameters and Expectations for Learning and Engagement.
- Supporting Parents to Structure Home-Learning Environments.
- Maximizing the Home-School Partnership in a Virtual World.

Cost Considerations

School budgets must be increased to provide the extras that are required to enact the recommendations. To ensure our students have a level playing field and equitable treatment, the school will need to provide some of these measures as the cost cannot be passed on to parents. New York City public schools need a federal stimulus package because a blended model comes with significant cost implications. Specifically, the schools need:

- PPE for adults and masks for students.
- Additional personnel.
- Technology.
- Cleaning supplies.
- Plastic partitions for physical distancing.
- Classroom furniture (some types, such as group tables, may not be appropriate).
- Walking ropes.
- Hula Hoops and pool noodles for distancing.
- Classroom supplies, including manipulatives.

Questions to Consider

We have attempted to answer many questions and put forth recommendations, yet there are still numerous unanswered inquiries. Some looming questions are:

- What are the unintended consequences of a reduced city budget or no federal stimulus package?
- How do you support students with separation anxiety and maintain the integrity of the early-childhood classroom when items generally found there — including stuffed animals, soft toys, pillows, dress-up clothes, fabrics, carpets/rugs, bedding and extra clothing for accidents — will be limited or not permissible?
- How do we utilize paraprofessional and other staff if we require students to switch from outdoor shoes to indoor shoes?
- What about fire drills?
- Will staff also change shoes since students play on the floor?
- How do we maintain the integrity of the early-childhood classroom when we must reduce or limit community sensory play since we cannot wash items such as water, sand, clay, flubber, play dough and foam?
- What is the best way to utilize cluster teachers?
- What is the difference between disinfecting and sanitizing, and what is the proper bleach-to-water ratio?

Closing thoughts on creating an effective model for blended instruction

Ultimately, the school system must be responsive to where we are now. Because we must prioritize limiting what students handle and reducing their contacts with their peers, school will look and feel different. Reducing movement throughout the school building enhances safety. Teachers should rotate, not students. Teachers and their students must eliminate congregating on classroom rugs, sharing musical instruments and manipulatives and supplies.

Some elements governing the traditional elementary school classroom will no longer work in a blended model. It is no longer feasible to gather multiple grades and classes eating in the cafeteria, or in the auditorium for assemblies and school productions. Center time, community book and folder bins, playing on the playground equipment, as we know it, will not return when schools reopen.

Despite the challenges, we approach reopening schools as an opportunity to create an effective model for blended instruction. Communication and flexibility are key. While we take the time to familiarize ourselves and our students with the new measures and protocols, we must continue our conversations and importantly, we must watch and listen. Setting aside the time for the in-person and remote teachers to collaboratively plan lessons is not a luxury, it's essential. Educators gained familiarity with the Google platform; maintaining this platform simply makes sense. Relevant and quality professional learning is needed. Our capacity to meet this unprecedented moment in the history of public education exists.

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