

Public & Social Sector Practice

Reopening schools: Fostering a safe and effective learning environment

Following closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, school systems have much to consider as they embark on a new school year.



© FatCamera/Getty Images

In this episode of the *McKinsey Podcast*, Diane Brady speaks with McKinsey partner Jimmy Sarakatsannis about how school systems can keep students safe and engaged as they embark on a school year unlike any other. An edited transcript of their conversation follows.

Diane Brady: Hi, and welcome to the *McKinsey Podcast*; I'm Diane Brady. Here in the US and in much of the Northern Hemisphere, it's time to go back to school. This year, there's the added anxiety of how kids will go back to school. With COVID-19 still spreading, how do we keep people safe and keep students learning? What impact could this have on students and on education itself? Joining me is Jimmy Sarakatsannis, a leader in McKinsey's North American education group in Washington, DC, who also leads the firm's K-12 work internationally. Jimmy, welcome.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Thanks, Diane. It's a pleasure to be here.

Diane Brady: Let's get some sense of the landscape. What did we learn from the shutdowns last spring?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: One thing we learned is, very few schools and school systems were ready for remote schooling. There was a big scramble in pretty much every home and in every school and school system to figure out how to keep students learning when they can't go into schools.

A lot was tried. Thankfully, many school systems did try remote schooling. Some of them found it too difficult to even get items such as paper-and-pencil-based resources and any sort of connection to their students. But many were trying daily, doing check-ins with their students virtually at multiple points throughout the day through videoconferencing, apps, and other tools.

Some countries with even less access than much of the US were creating TV and radio stations that students could tune into to get at least some

instruction. Largely, though, we learned that the scramble in the spring wasn't good enough. And despite many of our best efforts, we need to do better if we're going to continue remote and virtual instruction in the coming school year.

Diane Brady: I'm the parent of a high schooler, and I have visions of him lying on his bed, saying he was logged into classes, and it not going well. And I start to think about kids who don't even have access to computers. Tell us about the learning gaps and what happened there.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: We're still trying to figure out exactly what level of learning did happen in the spring. Our hope is that over the next couple of months, as students go back to some version of school, we can assess what students actually do know, where they actually are, and compare that to where they were in other years.

But we do know that there is a wide variation in access among students. We know that in the US, for example, there were big gaps in access to devices and connectivity among lower-income students, among black students, among Hispanic students. We saw this in log-in data and from self-reported information on simple access.

We estimate that if disruption to access continues until January, students in the US will lose about seven months of learning. But that loss won't be equal: given that level of disruption, we expect white students will lose about six months of learning, Hispanic students about nine months, and Black students up to ten months of learning.

Diane Brady: It's almost as if remote learning is worse for students than if they had not been to school at all, in some cases. Could you give me some sense of what it is that has caused students to suffer so much?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: It's not clear that remote learning was worse than not being in school at all. But it's definitely the case that low-quality remote

“It’s definitely the case that low-quality remote learning, or students struggling to even log in or have any access or interaction with their teachers, is at least as bad as what we’ve seen in past years for students losing ground over the summer, for example.”

learning, or students struggling to even log in or have any access or interaction with their teachers, is at least as bad as what we’ve seen in past years for students losing ground over the summer, for example.

And some of the challenges come from what we would expect. First and foremost, as we’ve said, the ability to have a device and strong enough internet connection to actually log in if there is a session with a teacher or a discussion is important.

We’ve all learned as parents and as adults trying to work remotely through this time that it’s not always easy. It’s not always easy to find a quiet, calm place, and students are no exception. We also know that students in challenging circumstances have a harder time finding a calm setting to be able to do that.

And finally, imagine a second grader, a third grader, a kindergartner trying to engage pretty much on their own for an entire day. Those students who have a parent or a guardian or some other family member who can support them throughout the day are going to have a much easier time of learning and staying productive and engaged and enjoying themselves than a child who has all of their family members either at work or needing to be engaged in work and unable to spend time supporting them

throughout the day. There are a range of factors, many of which end up challenging, again, students of color and low-income students more than their white, wealthier peers.

Diane Brady: You raise a good point about younger kids because they can’t engage in the same way. When you think about who needs to get into the classroom once it’s safe to be there, how would you rank the different groups?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: This is a tough question that every community in the US and around the world is thinking about, with some of them thinking about it differently. In general, there appears to be consensus that there are three groups of students for whom school systems are trying to bring back some form of supportive learnings first.

And those are basically the couple of groups that we’ve been talking about—those students who might be furthest behind in their learning because of access challenges in the spring or other challenges engaging in remote learning. Group one includes students who are experiencing greater challenges and are further behind and students with special needs that simply can’t be met outside of the classroom. In the US, that’d be students with IEPs [Individualized Education Programs]. Essentially,

students who are receiving some sort of special-education service. Some of those programs can't be effectively done remotely. So that's another group of students that school systems should try to get back in person first.

We have learned, and it matches a lot of our intuition, that for the youngest students, it's more difficult for them to engage in learning remotely. But also, if they're home, families can't go back to work. It's also critical from an economic-activity standpoint and the ability to reopen and restart the broader economy—getting younger children back to school so that schools can perform what should be the secondary role of childcare.

Diane Brady: You mentioned how schools suddenly shut down. We've now had several months to plan. So how will remote learning look different?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: We've had a couple of months to plan. We've also had several months for schools and school systems to ask their families and their communities how it went and what they would like to see different. And I think there are a couple of things that are likely to change across many school systems as we get back to school.

The first is, I expect there will be more emphasis on what a full-day experience should look and feel like for students, for their families, and for the teachers. In the spring, it was basically do whatever we can. And there were often long stretches of time where students or their families didn't know what they should be doing because educators hadn't figured out what they should be doing at the moment, because it was new for everybody.

With time, there's going to be a lot more purposeful planning for what an experience should look and feel like: How much of the day should be live instruction versus independent work? How much should be digital and online versus offline, paper and pencil, or just reading?

For live sessions, how much of that is big-group, whole-class instruction, versus small-group instruction with a teacher, versus one on one with a teacher, one on one with some other adult, or even small groups of individual students? More thoughtful experiences will be crafted for a student's day.

Diane Brady: Jimmy, what are some of the different ways to build a hybrid model?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: First, lay out the purpose of a hybrid model, as school systems are now thinking about how we can have some students in school, in person, while other students are home.

The main objective is to reduce the number of students physically in a school at a given time so that the school can practice a range of physical-distancing guidelines. And there are a few ways that school systems are trying to figure this out. The first is thinking about the old model of students receiving instruction and having experiences in school and then doing homework out of school but taking that to a wider extreme.

For example, if it's a student's turn to be in school on Monday and Tuesday and then home Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, on Monday and Tuesday, they would have lots of interaction with their teachers, lots of small-group practice. They would get lots of instruction on those two days and lots of social time in those two days. And then Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday would be more about practice and independent work, building on those two days of in-person instruction, much like we think about homework otherwise.

Diane Brady: Here in New York, I think we're one of the few large school systems where parents have been given a choice between remote and hybrid. And it's an agonizing decision. Do you have any advice?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: It's a tough decision. I have a first grader starting in a public school in DC this year. We weren't given a choice. In some ways, I'm thankful because I don't know how to necessarily make that choice. Students are starting fully remote here.

It comes down to your own family's risk factors and tolerance for risk and your own circumstances. There are, in some ways, no wrong answers but also no fully right answers at this time. It comes down to what each family thinks is best for their child: what's best for their family in terms of both health-risk factors and financial, economic, and work realities and then the extent to which their child can thrive in or out of school.

Diane Brady: Obviously, keeping staff safe is important, too. One of the things that intrigues me about your background is that you, yourself, were a middle-school teacher. How does that inform how you view these issues?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: I now feel all sides. I was a middle-school teacher. I'm now a parent. And I work with leaders of school systems to help try to understand, from that vantage point, what to do. There's not a week that goes by that I don't think about my days in the classroom and my students during normal times. And lately, I think about it every day. I personally can't imagine what it would be like, either, to teach all of my students—I had 115 every day back then—fully remotely.

Diane Brady: Where did you teach?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: I taught in DC public schools, at a middle school. The challenge of a teacher who's been teaching for decades (or even just one year) fully in person and then having to switch to do that fully remotely is daunting. I definitely feel for all those teachers who are having to figure that out now.

The challenge of splitting that up and having some students in person on a couple of days and other students remote means, essentially, you could have to do twice as much planning and twice as much management at one time. And even if and when schools are back fully in person, before there's a vaccine, there will be new challenges to deal with in maintaining physical distance, new routines, et cetera, all of which are different and new. Teaching was hard enough before we had a global pandemic to deal with. So I can certainly feel for them.

Diane Brady: I think I can hear your first grader.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: I think that's true. Day one of virtual school ended 30 minutes ago.

Diane Brady: Jimmy, what would your teacher self say to the parent that you are now? Any advice?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: I'm a bit reticent to take advice from my 12-years-younger self. But I think: hang in there, be patient, roll with it. This is new for all of us. Extend your child's teacher a little bit of grace. Extend yourself a little bit of grace. But also, for my son, it's his one chance to experience first grade. For every student out there, it's their one chance to experience the grade that they're in now.

“With time, there’s going to be a lot more purposeful planning for what [a school-day] experience should look and feel like.”

Diane Brady: How about your parent and McKinsey selves? Any advice to teachers, in deference to the fact that it's been 12 years since you've taught middle school?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: All teachers have relied on the support of families and parents in the past. But this year, that support is exponentially more important. Therefore, the level of communication, the frequency of communication, and the specificity of communication are going to be higher than they've ever been before. As a parent, I appreciate that the more conversation, the more interaction with my son's teachers, no matter how much there is. That's the main thing.

Diane Brady: There's been a lot of discussion at the college level about rethinking college, as students sit in their rooms completing coursework. When you think about the K–12 system—I know it's early days yet—what do you think the long-term impact of remote learning is likely to be on the model?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: That's a great question. There are a few things that have changed pretty substantially since the spring. And we were just talking about parent engagement. Parent engagement is dramatically higher, not necessarily voluntarily, than it was a year ago at this time.

But what's interesting is what many parents, when asked, are saying. Aside from supervising their children at home, the elements of engagement around understanding what their child is doing in school, wanting to know how they are doing, and planning to take more of a role in the response to how they are doing—those numbers are all high.

Parents are saying, at least for now, that they plan to stay as engaged as they are now. That's one thing that will change. Schools are figuring out how to work more with parents. And that is likely to be a muscle that schools and school systems build that will stick around.

Diane Brady: What about the classroom model itself?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: There are two things that have changed and have the potential to be enduring changes. One is the level of technology use and the access to technology. The other is the role of the teacher. Everyone is upping their tech quotient and their tech skills during this time.

Some schools and school systems are building entire platforms that offer virtual instruction full time. Others are making lots of their content digital and putting content online. Whether it's in small ways, such as always having a way to assign and have students practice work and instruction online, to big ways, such as always giving students some sort of online or virtual option, digital and online content will likely be here to stay in some shape or form.

In order for teachers to use these hybrid models, in order to have enough adult interaction with students in a physically distanced school setting or remotely, more adults are taking part in interactions with students.

Diane Brady: Do you mean more adults are taking part in interactions with students as coaches?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Yes, such as when coaches in physical schools supervise a study hall while students practice independently. But what we're finding is that schools are trying to figure out how to get teachers who have the skill and the experience to do things that only teachers can do, like share new content or deeply engage with a small group of students in practice.

Schools are trying to figure out how to extend the time that teachers do teacher things and spend less time supervising the cafeteria or even grading papers or planning lessons. That unbundling and redefinition of the teacher role to make sure teachers are spending time on things that only teachers can do is potentially something else that we'll see change.

Diane Brady: It's hard to separate out pandemic issues from school-system issues. But I've come

to appreciate the social and emotional role that schools play. How much attention will be paid to that this fall?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Lots of attention is being paid to that. Before the pandemic, we know that, in the US, at least 80 percent of all mental-health services and other social and emotional services that are provided to students happen through schools. Schools are an access point for children in communities.

And that's likely to continue. What's changed is the importance of that access point and the knowledge and awareness of the importance of it. There are reports in China of significant numbers of students self-reporting symptoms of depression or other mental-health issues following school closures earlier this year. We're starting to hear at least anecdotal reports of that throughout the US.

I can't say that we've come up with all the solutions right now. But certainly, ranging from small things, like schools dedicating the first week or two to simply building relationships and checking in on students emotionally, to larger efforts, such as deliberately building mental-health and emotional- and social-support elements into the curriculum, the solutions help in the day to day. Also, finding ways to support parents and engage family members in both checking in on their children and providing some support to their children on these topics while they're at home is important.

Diane Brady: I'm glad you mentioned China because everybody has been dealing with fallout from the pandemic, clearly not just the US. What lessons, good and bad, can we learn from other markets?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: There are a couple of lessons we can learn. First, the context of the place matters. The actual health indicators, number of COVID-19 cases, trajectory of cases, hospital and broader healthcare-system capacity, and also

the ability to test and contact trace—all of these contribute to a region's ability to bring people back to school in person. That's what we learned from both good and struggling cases abroad.

The other thing we learned was the value of communication and engagement with the community. We saw some international systems that basically decided on a Friday they were going to open up school on a Monday, had choppy and inconsistent communication with families and teachers, and then had to change guidance, almost on a daily basis, throughout the first couple of weeks. Systems such as that had pretty significant challenges with COVID-19-infection rates and with the ability to keep schools open.

Contrast that with other systems that made plans weeks in advance, phased in the start of school—some students in week one, more students in week two, and more students in week three—and had robust communication with families, teachers, and other stakeholders. They were able to have a much more seamless opening and fewer challenges with infection rates and other things.

I'd say those were the main things that we learned from early attempts at reopening in the spring. As we open up in the fall, and more school systems try getting more students back in person and have a more robust approach to the hybrid and remote learning, I think it'll be important to collectively, as communities and as a field overall, deliberate about what questions we ask, what data we collect, and, therefore, what we can learn about what's going on and what works.

Diane Brady: It's interesting because while remote learning is new to me, there are many families around the world who have done this, to some extent, whether they're homeschooling or otherwise. Any inspiration that we can take from them or even research on what parents, teachers, and students can do better in that environment is helpful.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: You're so right. Virtual learning has been around for a couple of decades. Granted, these are schools where families opted in to support their child's learning at home and have their child learn remotely. But there are a few things that the most successful virtual-school networks and individual schools have done that can be instructive for schools now.

Some of the supports put in place for students include a dedicated text or chat line, especially for at-risk students—to connect them with, for example, an experienced tutor or peer. In such cases, virtual-engagement metrics are used to identify which students might need further one-to-one support or encouragement to engage—if, for example, they aren't answering questions in a live chat or otherwise logging on.

We also see that the best virtual schools maintain something that looks like the routine of a typical in-person school day. Having a morning check-in, a midday touchpoint, an afternoon checkout, things like that, are helpful. Also, we know the virtual schools weren't fully digital. They would mail not only computers but also books, printed materials, manipulatives, and other physical resources to students so they could use those throughout the school year.

Diane Brady: So they are virtual schools but without eight hours of remote learning?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: That's right.

Diane Brady: Jimmy, what is a manipulative?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Good question. They're little things, objects, to help students count from one to ten—pegs on a pegboard, things like that. Tools they can use with their hands to improve their learning.

Diane Brady: Ah, fidget spinners. No?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Yes, something like that.

Diane Brady: We don't know when the pandemic will end; ergo, we don't know when the current school situation will end. So as someone who researches and advises in this area, what's on your radar right now?

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: There are two things. One is looking for school systems to be able to determine what they and their peers are doing on a pretty granular level, all the way from the health and safety protocols for in-person students to what in-person learning and other supports will be in place to which remote-learning models to use to make sure that, six months from now, we aren't saying the same thing we were three months ago, which is that we're trying lots of things but don't know what works and what doesn't.

That's the main thing on my mind now: that we stay focused and we're able to learn from the experiments and everything that people are trying right now. The second is, while a vaccine may still be many months out, there are other developments happening around our understanding of the virus and our understanding of how to essentially live and try to get as close to normal life as we can with the virus.

Research on what role children play in both contracting and transmitting the virus, what that means for their safety and the safety of adults in the classroom, advances our ability to test and contact trace and to increase the amount of in-person time that could happen for students in schools.

Essentially, all this applies beyond schools to our broader economy and public-health situation and how we can use that to make it easier on schools to do the things that they need to do, which is focus on education and supporting students in other facets.

Diane Brady: I do want to end on your point, which stayed with me, about the learning loss of students, especially the number of months they have lost already. What advice do you have? It sounds like you almost have to accelerate learning to help kids

catch up. As this goes on, I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on how to address that.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: We absolutely do. We know that there were opportunity gaps between different groups of students before the pandemic. We know the pandemic is widening those gaps. So we have to find ways to accelerate the learning for those students who fell most behind.

And we know there are some things that can do this: more intensive support for students who are behind, whether it's through one-on-one tutoring, more time with highly effective teachers, or simply more time in school; longer school days, using time over the summer or other vacation breaks. But finding ways to have more time with students, more contact points, can help.

Another option is, we need to maintain our high expectations for students. There's plenty of research that says students who are exposed to on-grade-level content are more likely to catch up than students who are catered to and only exposed to content that we think they can handle, without trying to challenge them.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis is a partner in McKinsey's Washington, DC, office, and **Diane Brady** is a senior editor in the New York office.

Designed by McKinsey Global Publishing
Copyright © 2020 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.

And the third is not only to focus on the academics but also to support the whole child, everything from their relationships with the adults that are working with them to broader social and emotional supports that tend to their mental and physical health overall.

I think that the challenge to us all is, we know some of these things work. We've closed some achievement gaps in pockets before. But this is a whole new scale. So we need to invest as a society, as an education field, as families to do these things at a pace, a scale, and a level of intensity that, frankly, we haven't been able to do before.

Diane Brady: I can't think of a better place to end than here. Thank you very much, Jimmy.

Jimmy Sarakatsannis: Thank you, Diane. It was a pleasure.

Diane Brady: That was Jimmy Sarakatsannis, who coleads McKinsey's education group in the US. Thank you for joining us. If you'd like to know more about the research that Jimmy and his colleagues have done, go to [McKinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com). I'm Diane Brady.