What It Means for Louisiana Schools to Move from Phase 2 to Phase 3 Reopening

PHASE 3 REOPENING HAS MAJOR IMPACT ON LOUISIANA SCHOOLS AND ENHANCES LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS

As the new academic year began for most in August, students returned to "school" in a fashion that was far different from the normal classrooms they left in the spring. On March 13 Governor John Bel Edwards signed an executive order closing schools until mid-April. He later approved another order shutting them down for the remainder of the school year.

Those weeks from the middle of March to the close of the academic school year at the end of May were in many ways like the wild, wild, West in terms of public education. Schools that had never entertained the notion of shutting down because of a pandemic were not surprisingly caught off guard.

Student instruction was never supposed to stop, but in many cases it did, sometimes for weeks. Some districts were able to move quickly and adapt to the new realities, but most struggled, hampered by technology gaps that many education leaders were never quite able to overcome. To a large degree, the school year ended in confusion and growing uncertainty over the impact the school closures would have on Louisiana's more than 825,000 public and private-school students.

The 2020-21 School Year

School districts spent the summer devising plans for the reopening of school in the fall. During that time, the state itself moved through a series of stepped re-openings. After several weeks under a general stay-at-home order, the state moved into a Phase 1 reopening in mid-May and then to Phase 2 in early June.

As the school year began for most in August, Louisiana was still in Phase 2. That meant a resumption of classes and teaching unlike most students had ever seen before, highlighted by a heavy reliance on virtual learning and only a couple of days of in-person instruction, if that.

But the move to Phase 3, which the governor authorized on September 10, was huge news for Louisiana schools and its impact on students, educators, and parents is significant. It brings with it a notable relaxing of certain restrictions, which does not eliminate masks, distancing, and most other safety precautions, but does allow for a return to a greater degree of normal instruction.

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As we have seen before, this will vary by district and, in some cases, by type of school. But we can get a snapshot of what the difference between what Phase 2 and Phase 3 look like statewide through district plans and survey responses that were submitted to the Department of Education in late summer 2020.

They only reflect district plans just before the school year opened and could change depending upon various circumstances. But they paint a picture of a school environment still following strict safety requirements, but taking a significant step towards returning to more normal instructional models.

Phase 2 vs. Phase 3

The biggest change for schools between Phase 2 and Phase 3 had to do with group sizes. Under Phase 2, group sizes, whether indoors or outdoors, were limited to just 25 individuals, regardless of the size of the room or space. That was a huge impediment to many schools, particularly larger high schools that often enroll more than a thousand students. Phase 3 allowed them to increase group sizes to 75 people. While that did not solve all their problems, it removed part of a major obstacle for many schools that now gives them much greater flexibility to configure classrooms, hallways, and other public spaces for in-person learning.

The other big boost in Phase 3 dealt with transportation. School buses were originally limited to 50-percent of capacity, which created a significant challenge for districts in getting students to school. Under Phase 3 it is 75-percent of capacity. Buses will still be required to provide appropriate spacing between students to the greatest degree possible, so it is unclear how great the impact of the change will be in all cases. But it clearly gives education leaders more flexibility when it comes to transporting students to and from school.

These changes from Phase 2 to Phase 3 will have a clear impact on school campuses and the learning experience for students across the state. Things will not be back to "normal." There will still be health and safety protocols that will continue to make this school year look and feel quite different. But Phase 3 will relax some restrictions that should improve learning opportunities for students, if they and their teachers and staff can remain healthy and protected from COVID.

STUDENT LEARNING

In looking at the data from the Department of Education's summer 2020 survey, the most significant impact of moving from Phase 2 to Phase 3 comes in the instructional models districts are using for student learning. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of traditional districts planned their opening of the school year in Phase 2 using a hybrid model that blended some in-person instruction with virtual learning. In fact, 80-percent were either all virtual or hybrid.

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Phase 3 has flipped that number almost upside down, with 72-percent of instruction going back to in-person and only 28-percent using some form of virtual teaching. In Phase 2 that was largely a function of grade, where in-person instruction was focused primarily on younger students, with those in middle and high school using more of a hybrid approach.

The change is not as dramatic when it comes to charter schools. Of Louisiana's 1,300 public schools, more than 150 of them are charters. Together they enroll about 10-percent of all public-school students. Their Phase 2 plans included only about 4-percent of full, in-person instruction, and roughly 90-percent hybrid. In Phase 3 they increase in-person instruction to about 43-percent, but the majority of instruction remains hybrid.

Interestingly, private schools were a different story. Non-public schools reporting their plans to BESE had already planned for 69-percent of their students attending full, in-person classes in Phase 2 – more than three times what traditional schools were doing. In Phase 3 that jumps to 85-percent.

FORMATS FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING

There are different formats schools use for virtual learning. The most common are called synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous instruction simply means that classes are meeting together with their teacher much like they would be doing at school, but the class is being taught virtually, in real-time, instead. Not only are all or parts of classes participating at the same time, but there is often the opportunity for interaction between students and teachers.

Asynchronous, is somewhat the opposite. Classes are not taught in real-time, but may be recorded or offered in another way that provides instruction in a flexible format where students can access it at any time.

Of course, there are also variations on both of those themes. Some provide hybrids with a blending of occasional classroom sessions with mostly virtual instruction. Others might provide students with various content and assignments for them to read or view, and then give them a set time frame for their completion.

For the most part, districts are not making huge changes in their formats for virtual learning in Phase 3. The major shift is that traditional school districts are bumping up their real-time, synchronous instruction from 40-percent in Phase 2 to 53-percent in Phase 3.

Charter schools are doing a little less of the synchronous instruction, but that could be a function of replacing it with more in-person teaching. Private schools are mostly unchanged with a little more than half of their virtual instruction in real time.

ALTERNATE SCHEDULING

One of the key ways schools dealt with the tighter restrictions in Phase 2 was to shift to alternate school days. In many cases that meant one group of kids went to school on Mondays and Wednesdays and another group on Tuesdays and Thursdays with everyone going virtual on Fridays. In Phase 3 you see districts making a big shift away from that approach. Where 72-percent of districts were using that model in Phase 2, just under 20-percent retain some of that in Phase 3. For students in 59-percent of traditional districts, school pretty much returns to normal scheduling.

Charter schools outside of Orleans Parish show a similar shift with half eliminating their alternate days, while those in New Orleans stay with about 65-percent using some form of alternate scheduling. Most private schools, at 81-percent, continue to follow normal scheduling, but their percentages were already high in Phase 2.

STUDENT MEALS

Even in Phase 3, the lunchtime experience will remain different for most students. Phase 3 allows rooms like cafeterias to expand to hold groups of up to 75 people, with proper social distancing, but it appears that the traditional lunchroom setting will be slow to come back.

Cafeteria dining in traditional schools grows from just under 20-percent to a little more than a third. But the vast majority of kids will continue to eat elsewhere. About 64-percent will have lunch in their classrooms or some other setting besides the cafeteria. Charter schools avoid the cafeteria in larger numbers, and even in private schools, which have generally followed more traditional routes during the pandemic than their public-school counterparts, more than half will continue to use different settings for providing meals.

Conclusion

The move to Phase 3 is a hugely significant change when it comes to education and instruction. It literally means that hundreds of thousands of students who would have had to rely heavily on virtual learning from home, will now be able to spend most of their time back in the classroom. That does not mean things will be back to normal.

But it does mean more students will be in school, interacting with their teachers, having social experiences with their friends, and gaining access to services they might otherwise be missing. They will also be having a more enriching learning experience and the positive nature of these developments cannot be overstated.

But a return to Phase 2 is not out of the question. As cooler weather approaches and flu season gets into high gear, disruptions are not just possible, many consider them likely. Phase 2 instruction will not be of the same quality as students will get in Phase 3. So, it is critical that the safety precautions put in place in schools are maintained with fidelity. And the students who are mandated to follow the rules at school continue to do so when they get home.

Phase 3 is a big step forward for our kids in every aspect of the learning experience and one that all of us should work diligently to maintain. We should note that it probably will not get any better than this for the remainder of the school year, but without vigilance and attention to safety, it could get much worse.

Note: This briefing is based on data provided by school districts to the Louisiana Department of Education through a survey of local school districts, charter schools and BESE-approved nonpublic schools. It was compiled just before the start of the 2020-21 school year. This report is offered as a snapshot of that moment and some plans may have changed. CABL believes it provides value by offering insight not otherwise available into the plans of schools and districts for delivering instruction in each of the three phases of reopening under COVID.

All traditional school systems and BESE-authorized charter schools responded to the survey. The response rate for BESE-approved non-public schools was 93-percent. It should be noted that as of this writing, all of New Orleans remains in Phase 2 reopening. In addition, Hurricane Laura caused extensive damage to schools in southwest Louisiana and reopening plans have been greatly disrupted in those areas.

Sourcing for data charts: Louisiana Education Department survey of districts, summer 2020

CABL
COUNCIL FOR A BETTER LOUISIANA

251 Florida St., Ste. 400
Baton Rouge, LA 70801
225-344-2225
cabl.org