



FAQs regarding Return+Learn Phase II Reopening Plan in Atlanta Public Schools

Updated 10.16.2020

Superintendent Lisa Herring on Friday, October 16, announced her decision for Atlanta Public Schools to delay its return to face-to-face instruction. This decision comes based on the district's continued tracking of COVID-19 health data, which is currently tracking on an unfavorable trend, and in consultation with public health officials and healthcare experts. Superintendent Herring also considered data based on feedback from our families, staff, and stakeholders.

Given this current information and careful consideration, Atlanta Public Schools has postponed its reopening plans for in-person learning and will continue with the current virtual model until at least January 2021.

But the APS commitment to giving EVERY student a quality education remains strong.

Atlanta Public Schools continues to engage students, their families, teachers, staff, and the entire APS community as the district continues working through its Return+Learn reopening plan. These frequently asked questions (FAQs) address today's decision and also reflect issues and questions raised during recent town halls, fireside chats, and other conversations as the entire community works to educate our children amid a pandemic.

1. Why did APS choose to remain virtual until January 2021?

As Superintendent Herring and other APS officials have shared in numerous virtual town halls, fireside chats, memorandums, weekly videos, and news reports, all decisions regarding our phased approach for a return to face-to-face teaching and learning remain rooted in the current COVID-19 health data for our community and other factors we deemed important.

To be more specific, APS would NOT return if the school community remained in substantial spread, which is currently the case.

The decision to further delay the in-person opening of our schools was difficult. But after consulting with our teachers, staff, students, families, and public health officials, Superintendent Herring decided this is the right approach at this time.

2. What data did APS use to make the decision?

APS monitors, on a daily basis, the COVID-19 data published by the Georgia Department of Public Health at this link: <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>. That daily report contains levels of community transmission over 14 days, the rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and percent of positive tests by county. Despite downward trends in recent weeks, our community has seen recent increases in new cases, resulting in a current average that exceeds 130 new cases per 100,000 county residents. That number leaves us in substantial spread of COVID-19 and unable to reopen to in-person instruction.

The specific information we refer to for decision making is based on the information included on the maps from GA Department of Public Health (<https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>) titled “COVID-19 by County.” When hovering over the individual counties, our team locates the levels of community transmission/spread which is denoted as the “cases per 100K (last two weeks)” and includes the 14-day incidence rate of new diagnoses.

We will continue to provide the regular public health data checks. The next one is scheduled for the Monday, November 2, meeting of the Atlanta Board of Education.

3. Atlanta Public Schools asked families to complete the Intent to Return Declaration Form. What are the results from the collection of those forms, and did this data inform the decision-making process?

APS sent the Intent to Return Declaration Form to 38,397 students, which represents the total PreK-12 enrollment of all traditional APS schools. Please note that this figure does not include charter and partner students, which represents an additional 10,000+ students. Families of students at charter and partner schools did not participate in the intent to return process. We appreciate the more than 22,000 families (or 58% of you) who submitted their forms by the deadline.

Of those submitting the forms, 10,460 expressed their intent for their children to return to school if we were to resume in-person instruction. That’s less than half the people who filled out the form.

There are three schools that had more than 60% of students declare their intent to return in person. All three of these schools were elementary schools in the North Atlanta cluster, Brandon, Jackson, and Smith. We had 16 schools where less than 20% of students declared their intent to return in person. As a cluster, North Atlanta had the highest percent of students declare in person with 42%, compared to the Mays cluster, with only 19%. I should note that for the 16,200 families that did not return the forms, their forms defaulted to site-based virtual instruction.

We know there are differing opinions across families and communities regarding this decision. Superintendent Herring and her team considered many different voices throughout this process. At this time, she encourages unity across our school community as we work collaboratively through this pandemic and continue to put our students and staff first.

4. What is the district doing about its most vulnerable students?

We are encouraged by the fact that our students are engaged and have been logging on at an average rate of 95% each week. But many students remain vulnerable amid this teaching and learning during a pandemic.

We stand committed to supporting the academic, social, and emotional needs of every single student in APS, even as we continue in this virtual space. There's no question that this pandemic has affected our students and so many of us in different ways. Our most vulnerable students have been hit hardest, which is why we have implemented more deliberate outreach efforts, including but not limited to:

- Daily phone calls directly to parents and guardians of students when they are not logged on or do not remain online throughout the school day
- At-home visits when students have not logged-in over a three-to-four day period of time or if staff is unable to contact parents of students who are consistently not remaining logged-in
- Consistent monitoring of attendance and login rates every week
- Schools also send home "no contact letters," similar to the attendance letters they would send home in a traditional instructional setting.
- Support staff assists our teachers and administrators with these issues, and social workers are brought in as needed to engage with students who consistently remain offline during the school day.

In addition, we have followed through on the commitments we made this spring to distribute internet-connected devices to families across the district and partner with organizations that offer support for students who need them most.

Families of students who have any issues with virtual learning, devices, or connectivity should contact their schools immediately.

5. With the reopening plan, APS said Wednesdays would be designated for asynchronous instruction, with students learning at different times and at their own pace. Will this remain the same?

Wednesdays will remain synchronous instructional days, as we've been doing for the first nine weeks. That means students will experience teaching and learning at the same time. We were implementing asynchronous Wednesdays, in which students learn at different times and work at their own pace, only as part of our Phase II face-to-face plan. We appreciate the teachers who took the opportunity to organize, rearrange, and prepare their rooms on the professional learning days this week and know it will be helpful later to have undertaken these activities now.

6. Will the three Instructional Model Options remain the same?

At this time, APS has not changed the three instructional models.

7. What are the options for partner and charter schools?

The district's charter and partner schools must implement in-person learning reopening plans that are approved by the district and that follow COVID-19 mitigation protocols that are the same or similar to the district's. Given that the district has announced its decision to remain virtual at this time, the district's charter and partner schools also must remain virtual. Families of students in charter and partner schools should expect to hear directly from their schools.

8. How will APS handle food distribution for the rest of the semester?

With APS remaining in the virtual setting, our Nutrition program will provide seven-day weekly meal kits (seven breakfast meals and seven lunch meals) with distribution occurring each Monday, beginning October 26, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. from one of the 14 curbside pick-up locations or designated school bus routes listed at www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/63224.

9. What is the status of athletics?

Our high school football, volleyball, softball, and cross country teams will continue to compete, following the appropriate health and safety protocols we've put in place. No fans are allowed in the stands. In addition, we expect our winter sports athletes to begin conditioning soon, following all health and safety protocols.

10. Will APS re-survey teachers again for future phases?

The district will re-assess staff availability to work in person as part of reopening plans at each phase. It may or may not take the form of a survey. We now have much of the information we need about staff's medical or other personal conditions that would prevent them from working. We would seek to refresh this data in light of health conditions at the time of future reopening phases.

11. What is the status of telework for employees?

For our employees — both district office and school-based — whether you are currently working remotely or are reporting to work in person, please maintain your current schedule until further notice. Anyone with a telework application currently in process for Phase II reopening should complete the process to have their approval or denial documented for future reference.

New telework applications should not be submitted by school-based employees. (Some operations staff may still encounter a need to apply for telework.) Teachers, remember that you can still use your classrooms for virtual instruction. Any employee with questions about telework, paid leave, ADA accommodations, or any employee-related matter should contact their supervisor or the Human Resources department. All of our facilities are open to non-APS employees by appointment only.

The Following FAQs are based on the Proposed Reopening Models (Virtual, In-Person, Atlanta Virtual Academy) the District Presented at the October 5, 2020, Meeting of the Atlanta Board of Education

FAQs Related to Virtual Learning

11. What is the site-based virtual learning model?

In the proposed instructional model presented at the October 5, 2020, Board meeting, the APS site-based virtual learning model provides the opportunity for students to continue to learn at home while remaining enrolled and taught by a teacher at their home school. Virtual learning with your school is designed for families who don't feel comfortable sending their children back to school in person but ultimately plan to rejoin their enrolled school in the future. Based on the number of parents who choose this option, the local school will work to provide a virtual option for students.

12. What can I expect for my student if I choose virtual instruction?

In the proposed instructional model presented at the October 5, 2020, Board meeting, your student would log in daily to receive instruction taught by a teacher at their home school on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wednesday serves as an intervention day and/or academic support for individual students.

13. How do I know if virtual instruction is best for my child?

Site-based virtual instruction is best for families who would like to maintain their connection to their enrolled school and can have students available online during traditional school hours. Site-based virtual instruction is also best for students who thrive through continued relationships with their home school. Additional supports include online tutorial support, interventions as needed for social emotional learning, and access to teachers during office hours.

14. What happens to students from grades 6 through 12?

As part of Phase II of Return+Learn, students in grades 6 through 12 will remain in virtual environments. In accordance with public health data and the feasibility of school operations, we will then move to transition other students back into the face-to-face environment and eventually resume full school operations in future phases.

Please note: the district's charter and partner schools must implement in-person learning reopening plans that are approved by the district and that follow COVID-19 mitigation protocols that are the same or similar to the district's. Therefore, once a district decision about the transition to Phase II is announced, families of students in charter and partner schools should expect soon thereafter to hear directly from their schools as their plans may differ.

FAQs Related to In-Person Learning

*Based on the Proposed Models Presented at the October 5, 2020,
Board of Education Meeting*

15. What are ongoing measures APS is taking to safely return students to school?

Nothing is more important than safeguarding the health, well-being, and safety of our APS students, families, and staff. All of our decision-making is and will remain, grounded in the public health data and the associated guidance issued by the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Georgia Department of Education. Our plans are designed with flexibility in mind so we are well-positioned to pivot our decisions if necessary due to changing public health guidance.

16. When can we expect students to return to in-person learning?

Based on current COVID-19 health data and because of safety measures and protocols we have in place, we will make a final decision regarding the next steps of our reopening plan on October 16. We will base that decision on the most up-to-date public health data.

APS is closely monitoring the COVID-19 data daily: <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>. The report contains levels of community transmission over 14 days, rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and percent positive tests by county.

As a reminder, the indicator to shift to our Phase II plan remains guided by the Department of Public Health data that suggests at least fewer than 100 new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 Fulton County residents over a 14-day period. We are monitoring that data daily and will be posting updates leading up to our decision on October 16.

We continue to monitor the health status of the City of Atlanta, Fulton County, and DeKalb County. At this time, we do not plan to bring any students back for face-to-face instruction before Monday, October 26, which is the start of the second nine weeks of school.

17. Which students are being considered for a return to in-person learning first?

With the phased approach of Return+Learn, the district identified students who would likely return first to in-person learning if COVID-19 numbers trend down and allow for some form of face-to-face instruction within our schools. Below are the students who would likely have the opportunity to return first during our next phase:

- Students from PreK-5 in the district's traditional schools
- Students in Special Education Low Incidence classrooms, which includes students attending regional, self-contained classes as follows:
 - Preschool Special Education
 - Autism Functional and Social Communication (all grades)
 - Moderate Intellectual Disabilities (all grades)
 - Severe/Profound Disabilities (all grades)
 - Deaf/Hard of Hearing Self-Contained (all grades)

- GNETS (Georgia Network Educational Therapeutic Services – Oglethorpe Campus)

18. Why did the October 5 proposal include more grades to allow more students to return to in-person learning (PreK-5)

- a. We put forward a draft proposal at the Special Called Board of Education meeting on September 23 where we presented a draft proposal to offer parents the choice to return to in-person learning at district schools. That proposal included a hybrid model for learning for PK-2 and Special Education Low Incidence students to return to in-person learning on October 26.
- b. It prioritizes our most vulnerable students and provides families with a choice around what's best for the education of their students.
- c. After hearing feedback from stakeholders, additional review of our feasibility plan, and closely monitoring the health data, other approaches were considered:
 - i. Many students need the support provided through of face to face instruction. This is particularly true for younger learners. We recognize the importance of starting with this group once the appropriate time to return is identified.
 - ii. Some teachers will only be able to return for face to face instruction if their own children, who attend APS schools, can return to school (i.e., grades 3-5)
 - iii. The majority of our APS elementary schools have sufficient space and classrooms to permit safe social distancing for PreK-5.
 - iv. Dual Language Immersion (DLI), and English as a Second Language (ESOL), and other whole school supports would be difficult to implement for just one grade.
 - v. Music, Arts, and other programs can be implemented across the entire school and are critically important for some students
- d. At the October 5th Board meeting, we presented an updated plan that included a proposal for available learning models, the timing of phasing in those models, and offering more students the opportunity to return to in-person learning for a proposed date of October 26th.
- e. Also, the date for secondary students to return to an in-person learning option is tentative. Right now, we're proposing November 16. But, remember, it's all contingent on the health data and staffing considerations.

19. What's the plan for a COVID-19 outbreak after students return for in-person instruction?

When a student, teacher, or staff member tests positive for COVID-19 and has exposed others at the school, classrooms, and office areas may need to close temporarily as students, teachers, and staff isolate, and the area is cleaned. In consultation with the local public health department, the school district may also decide whether school closure is warranted, including the length of time closure may be necessary.

In the event of an identified positive case of COVID-19, all close contacts (as identified by case investigation in collaboration with health services) must be advised to quarantine until 14 days after the last contact with the identified individual.

If a close contact becomes ill and is diagnosed with COVID-19, they must remain excluded for their isolation period and until told they are no longer contagious (following the guidelines from the CDC and local departments of public health).

In regards to an actual outbreak, the Georgia Department of Public Health has stated: “A COVID-19 outbreak in a school setting is defined as Two or more laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases among students or staff with illness onsets within a 14-day period, who are epidemiologically linked (e.g., have a common exposure or have been in contact with each other), do not share a household, and were not identified as close contacts of each other in another setting during standard case investigation or contact tracing.”

If an outbreak is confirmed, school closures will be implemented for the timeframe designated by local public health officials.

20. What steps has APS taken to ensure school buildings are safe?

The goal has always been to strive for a return to in-person instruction as soon as the public health data indicates that it is safe for students, teachers, and staff to return to school buildings. From the start, our Facilities Department has been diligent in cleaning, sanitizing, and preparing our classrooms and buildings for in-person teaching and learning. Some of these efforts include:

- Cleaning and sanitizing our schools and buildings
- Adding hand sanitizing stations in common areas
- Installing wall-mounted sanitizer and paper towel stations in each core classroom
- Adding disinfectant towels in each classroom
- Increasing pre-occupancy and post-occupancy HVAC run times from two hours to three hours
- Initiating a weekly water flushing plan during building low occupancy periods
- Conducting high touch common area wipe downs for at least two cycles daily and monitoring hand soap and paper towel stocks throughout the day
- Conducting facility wipe downs during nightly cleaning
- Implementing restorative cleaning operations conducted post-COVID-19 exposure
- Taking water fountains offline and installing water bottle coolers

Additionally, teachers and staff have been working in our buildings – while maintaining social distancing and adhering to proper health standards – so that classrooms will be ready for students.

21. Why do I need to complete the Intent to Learn Declaration form? How will you use the data? What if I don't complete the form?

Completion of the declaration of intent allows the district to have accurate numbers about students planning a return to in-person instruction. This data is critical in creating schedules, assigning students, and developing plans for the rest of the school year.

The form defaults to virtual instruction; therefore, if a parent declined to fill out the form before the October 12 deadline, the form will indicate the student(s) will remain in the virtual instructional model they are currently participating, whether it is with their school or with Atlanta Virtual Academy, for the remainder of the first semester.

After the deadline, the district will ask all families again about their intent to return before the start of the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year on January 19, 2021.

22. Can families choose different options for different students?

Yes. Families can choose the best option they see fit for each student.

23. Will we know who our children's teachers are before we declare our intent to return?

Atlanta Public Schools cannot guarantee that families will know their children's exact teachers before completing the declaration form. The district is currently surveying teachers across the school system to understand their intent on returning to in-person instruction or remaining in a virtual capacity. Classes and schedules will be determined based on the numbers of educators, as well as students, who choose to return for in-person learning.

24. Will teachers teach in-person and virtual simultaneously?

There is a possibility that teachers will be teaching both in-person and virtually. The district will not make a determination before it has received and analyzed all of the data from Intent to Return Declaration forms.

25. What instructional models and timelines are under consideration?

The district outlined proposed models and timelines during the October 5, 2020, Board meeting. These are all proposed. The timing of these phases will depend on public health data. For more information, [click here to view the October 5 Board meeting](#).

26. What is the maximum class size for in-person instruction?

If schools have a large number of in-person learning requests, they may have to deploy a modified model to ensure the safety of students and staff. We will prioritize the students with the greatest need in the early grades and students receiving special education services.

Schedules at these schools may vary.

The district will work with principals to maximize social distancing in the classrooms to ensure the safety of students and staff.

27. What's the benefit of "losing a day of instruction?"

Although the proposed phased approach involves four days of in-person instruction, students will not lose the fifth day of school. This day will be used for independent practice, individualized instruction, digital learning, and interventions as necessary.

28. What other steps will APS take to develop these plans?

Our Schools and Academics Team continues to develop the specifics of our Phase II reopening instructional plans for each grade band (elementary, middle school, and high school) by working collaboratively with school leaders, teachers, and other staff to develop hybrid and face-to-face instructional plans.

Currently, we are revisiting our initial plans to address potential changes given our experiences from the first few weeks of school along with feedback from our building leaders, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders.

29. Do schools and clusters have the autonomy to select their reopen model?

No, they do not have the autonomy to select, but they will have the autonomy to build the class schedule using the data collected from the parent and teacher intent forms.

FAQs Related to Atlanta Virtual Academy

*Based on the Proposed Models Presented at the October 5, 2020,
Board of Education Meeting*

30. How does Atlanta Virtual Academy operate?

Atlanta Virtual Academy (AVA), our comprehensive PK-12 virtual program, is designed to provide students with an engaging model of instruction that includes live virtual instruction, interactive lessons, and participation in a thriving virtual community. Students can remain enrolled in their zoned neighborhood school and still engage with school sports. AVA will now offer a virtual option for PK-5 students.

Atlanta Virtual Academy has a full-time counselor and Academic Support Specialist. AVA's Academic Specialist will assist the school counselor in preparing the student for online instruction and develop a planned program of study. This program of study will guide the students from start to graduation. Additionally, AVA's counseling staff provides academic as well as Social and Emotional Learning support services. Our wraparound services are inclusive to ensure we support the whole child.

Students will have 24/7 access to their online courses and parents can expect to have regular communications sent via email that outlines student progress. A partnership between AVA and families is critical to ensure student success for the full-time virtual student.

Atlanta Virtual Academy offers a complete suite of virtual courses. AVA Elementary will offer core content online and elective courses will be taught by APS teachers. AVA provides Middle school students with all core courses, world language, health, and PE. AVA offers High school students core courses, World Language, Health, PE, Personal Fitness, Honors, AP, CTAE, and a variety of elective courses. The flexibility of virtual instruction allows for any time, anyplace, and anywhere learning.

31. What you can expect from your AVA Teacher?

Teachers will provide virtual support and live instruction via the Live Virtual Learning Classroom. Students who need additional support are just a click away from their online instructor. Additionally, teachers will use a multi-tiered approach to support student learning and ensure academic success. Teachers will conduct virtual huddle sessions with students to create community and momentum in their online courses. For our elementary students, the AVA teachers will provide daily synchronous learning sessions.

32. What is the Parent Experience?

Parents are encouraged to keep students on their “at home school schedule” and ensure they have a dedicated learning space in the home. Parents will receive daily reports of their students' progress during the Fall and Spring semesters.

Parents will have the opportunity to attend the virtual Parent Orientation where you will learn how to support your learner and stay informed. Parents can also attend weekly tutoring sessions with their students if they desire. AVA staff shares with parents strategies for successful completion of their students' courses such as recommended assignments to complete daily, how to remediate to improve and demonstrate mastery and excel.