



*A is for aerosol, B for biohazard, C for Covid-19, D for distancing...*

## Pandemic School Daze

Once again, it's time to get ready for the fall term of the new school year. Yet beyond the normal autumn anxieties about classes and cool gear, this year parents, students, teachers, and administrators face **unprecedented fears**.

Never before has whether or not to send kids back to school been such a potentially life-or-death decision left up to parents to figure out. Never before have such contradictory pressures, confusing lack of data, and last-minute changes surrounded what is normally a reassuring rite of passage. But then again, never before in modern times has there been an epidemic quite like this.

It's not just the **global lack** of consistent and rational leadership that's to blame. So much is still completely unknown about this novel coronavirus. While the science keeps changing daily, most news – but scarily **not all** – coming from **studies overseas** seems **encouraging**.

While kids **can** catch the disease, suffer horribly and even die from it, fortunately **most infections** in toddlers and kids are generally mild. Yet it seems their bodies can harbor just **as many viruses** as adults. New Mexico already has the **second highest percentage** of infected kids in the entire nation.

Reports from Asia and Europe indicate that **children** over 9 transmit the virus much like adults do, while younger children shed less. Most of the infected kids caught it from their caregivers, not the other way around. Whether due to the resilience of youth or foiled by the quick lockdown is still not sure.

Yet there is no doubt that **adults**, especially those elderly or with health problems, can be highly vulnerable. How to keep them safe may be a far bigger problem than dealing with kids, although that is a particularly daunting task.

Kids are kids and always will be kids. And by their nature, children are both messy and highly sociable. It may be insanely unrealistic to expect any rules on masks, social distancing, and not touching anything to hold back youngsters who have been cooped up

alone for months on end once they suddenly spot their friends again.

### The confusion over reopening

After isolating inside since spring, there is now a widespread longing to get back to "normalcy". Some politicians have been pushing relentlessly to send the kids back to school in order to free their parents to restart the country's sputtering economy again.

**Pediatricians** and teachers alike insist on the many benefits to children of classes and real-world interaction in schools – not just academic learning, but vital social skills, exercise, and even nutrition, especially for poorer families. Those **disadvantaged** are also those most likely to suffer from lack of internet access or computers.

The Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) just recently **released its plan** for the new school year. It **attempts** to deal with some disparities in wealth. APS will resort to a "grab and go" **meal pickup program** for parents to help feed students, and will start **issuing** Chromebooks or iPads about the time this is published. Internet access, however, will be left up to the families.

When (and if) classroom teaching begins in September, classes will be split into alphabetic halves by last name: A-L and M-Z. Each division will alternate attendance, reporting in person every other week for regular classes from Tuesdays through Fridays. All students are to take part in online classes every Monday and throughout the week not spent at school.

Face coverings are required for all, cleanings and screenings will take place each and every day. Constant social distancing will somehow be enforced. Yet adjustments and even radical changes may be necessary to prevent outbreaks.

It is important to be patient, for **nothing like this has ever been attempted before**. All these proposals are quite experimental. However well-thought out, these plans remain very tentative; they can be changed at any time, depending on new information or how the pandemic goes.

For no sooner did our own state education department issue its list of **recommendations** for **reopening public schools** safely than the **governor ordered** a delay of on-site learning at least until after Labor Day due to the latest data.

### Online alternatives

The **CDC** was tasked to develop the basic **recommendations** for reopening schools. They quietly published a step-by-step **overall plan** for reopening the entire economy months ago.

Their **specific advice** for school reopenings was **delayed** and only published recently. Some **critics suspect** the report was **watered down** for political reasons. It seems very heavy on emphasizing the benefits of schools for kids yet light on detailed proposals. The **plan** is at the CDC website, along with helpful **decision-making tools** for parents.

Many suggestions have been made ranging between opening schools normally – which is only a workable option in areas with few Covid cases – to conducting all education entirely remotely. The particular **“hybrid”** or **“blended”** concept APS chose is just one model for shrinking the numbers of kids together on campus.

One other option is dividing students into **“cohorts”** – small groups of kids who know each other from last year who are kept together in one spot with teachers moving between them.

Plus there are ideas involving ventilation: keeping windows wide open, placing teachers beneath air vents, or even holding classes outside to enjoy the benefits of cleansing sunlight and fresh air.

With even such marginal steps proposed to increase safety, it's not surprising that many teachers are extremely hesitant about returning to the classroom at all. APS recently decided to **allow teachers** to instruct remotely from home, but without hazmat suits, there's little more that can be done to make their classrooms secure.

In fact, a **national teachers' union** has said that **“safety strikes”** would be acceptable if their members do not feel their health is adequately protected. For many adults, online education may be more attractive and fraught with far less anxiety than returning to the classroom, even though many students seriously **fell behind** while trying to keep up at home this spring.

Be that as it may, online education over the internet has been going on for decades. There already was an immense amount of resources from kindergarten to post-graduate available long before the pandemic forced it all online.

APS has online **“eCADEMY Magnet Schools”** for grades **K-8** (just established this year) and for **9-12** (functioning now for a decade). Intended for students whose problems made attending a traditional school difficult, there are added fees.

There are also 55 **charter schools** in town, 29 authorized by APS. These are all tuition-free public schools with differing specialties and requirements that operate independently of the district. At least one, **New Mexico Connections Academy** for grades 4-12, is entirely online.

APS also supports **home schooling**, for DIY parents who want to have full control over their offspring's education. For them, online offerings, like the wide-ranging free video classes at **Khan Academy**, might be especially useful.

Online learning sites have been in high demand due to the pandemic. Time is fast running out to decide, but be assured that SWCP will be here to provide internet access.

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### A Small Bit of Good News

You may notice your Internet service bill is smaller this month.

The Internet Tax Freedom Act (ITFA) was first enacted in 1998. It directed states not charge sales tax for Internet access.

There was a grandfather clause which allowed states which were already taxing internet access to continue doing so for a limited time. The Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015 commands the remaining states collecting this tax to stop by July 2020. That included New Mexico.

As of our most recent invoices, we are no longer collecting sales tax on Wireless, DSL, and dialup internet service.

Web hosting services have been exempted from tax by New Mexico since the late 1990's, and that continues: no taxes on web sites and domain names.

Other goods and services, such as consulting, routers, email accounts, and installation charges will still have sales tax charged.



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