



Back to School Checklist for Fall 2020: Child Care, Afterschool Care, and Paid Family Leave

Public schools are starting instruction this month, leaving millions of working parents across New York confronting the question of how they will balance job responsibilities with caring for and supporting the education of their school-aged children who are receiving instruction remotely on a full or part-time basis. At the same time, parents are struggling to secure or maintain access to safe, quality child care for their infants, toddlers, and pre-school-aged children. Each of these parents is urgently considering what options are most safe, healthy, educationally productive, and financially viable for their children and families.

New York's more than 700 school districts have created school reopening plans and all involve some portion of remote instruction, and protocols for closing should students or staff test positive for COVID-19.

None of these plans can succeed without public infrastructure to make sure families have access to affordable and flexible child care and afterschool care. Paid family leave that is responsive to the likelihood of sudden short, or long-term school or child care closures is also needed. Even with the first day of school upon us, much of this infrastructure is not yet in place, leaving families scrambling.

Policymakers Have Failed to Integrate Child Care Needs into School Reopening Plans

The question of how working parents will balance work with caring for school-aged children who are receiving some or all of their school instruction remotely has been largely absent from school reopening conversations. School districts were not required to include in their school reopening plans a proposal for ensuring safe care for school-aged children for the periods they are scheduled to be receiving instruction remotely, and a brief survey of some of the 700 school district plans filed with the State reveals that most devoted just a few lines to this issue.¹ Nor have State plans for reopening the economy focused on the persistent and now exacerbated challenges facing parents of young children in finding safe, stable care for their children to enable them to continue to work.

For New York schools to reopen successfully this fall, and for the economy to continue its slow trek toward recovery, families need coordination across child and family-serving systems. Given that most of New York's school districts plan to provide some or all instruction through remote learning, many families with working parents will need more child and afterschool care than before the pandemic.

Most Children Have Working Parents

More than [two-thirds](#) of New York children under age 12 have all available parents in the workforce.



Already in Short Supply Before the Pandemic, Child Care and Afterschool Care Options Have Contracted Due to COVID-19

Although tens of thousands of families with young and school-aged children are likely to need more child care or afterschool services with parents returning to work, their options will likely be even more limited than usual. Many families are reluctant to rely on grandparents or neighbors to care for children due to health risks. At the same time, child care programs are struggling to survive financially after months of being closed or significantly under-enrolled, and school-aged child care (SACC) providers face [tremendous hurdles](#) to reopening.

According to a [national survey](#) of child care providers released by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in July, 40% of U.S. child care centers said they are certain that, without additional public funds, they will be forced to close permanently. Child care providers that have remained open are serving fewer children than they were before the pandemic, while enrollment is down by 67%. At the same time, more than 70% of child care centers nationwide are experiencing [additional costs](#) for staff (72%), cleaning supplies (92%), and personal protective equipment (81%). As they reopen or scale up as the economy reopens, they are facing myriad new health and safety requirements, including significantly smaller capacity limits. There is a growing consensus that without substantial public relief – and swiftly – the child care industry across the nation will [collapse](#).

Survey data collected by New York's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) for licensed child care providers confirms that New York providers are struggling to keep their doors open. Between March and June, 36% of NYS licensed providers report having closed. Those that remained open were operating at a sharply reduced capacity of 27%, on average. Early August survey results show enrollment increasing, but well below capacity, with 34% reporting enrollment at 50% capacity or less, and another 30% at between 50% and 75% capacity.²

New York's afterschool providers, most of which closed in March when New York schools closed, are facing considerable uncertainty as they try to meet the needs of students returning to school. According to an [August 2020 report](#) from the Network for Youth Success, one emerging problem facing New York school-aged child care (SACC) will be finding safe, adequate space. Sixty-five percent of SACC programs operate in schools. For the many schools offering staggered instruction, this means SACC programs will not be able to use school locations to provide care for children on the days they are receiving instruction remotely. Sixty percent of

SACC programs have reported they have not located a suitable alternate space to provide care. They are also facing delays in receiving contract payments from the State, staffing issues, and numerous other challenges.

The biggest hurdle facing child care and SACC programs is funding to cover additional costs associated with securing and renovating new facilities for care during staggered hours; retrofitting existing facilities to follow new public health guidance; paying for PPE and cleaning supplies; and paying for additional staff to allow for smaller class sizes and increased need for care due to staggered school schedules.

New York has provided some emergency relief for child care providers using federal relief funds appropriated in April under the CARES Act, but as of the first week in September 2020, just \$30 million of the \$164 million in earmarked federal relief funds has been delivered to providers in the field. An additional \$65 million is scheduled to be reimbursed to providers to support reopening in the coming weeks and the State just announced a plan to release most of remaining funds (\$70 million), but details and time of release are not yet clear. What is certain, these funds fall short of meeting the significant new costs of providing safe, quality care during this public health crisis.

Already Stretched, Families Cannot Bear the Brunt of Increased Costs of Care

While child care and afterschool programs need additional resources to operate safely and effectively in the current environment, parents cannot pay more. Parents were stretched to meet child care and afterschool care costs before the pandemic. Many are now facing significantly more financial challenges due to the impacts of the pandemic. The [Census reported](#) in late June that families with children have been the hardest hit, noting one in six adults in mortgaged households with children and one in four adults in rental households with children reported either a late or deferred payment. [Economists are predicting](#) that employees may return to work to find their work hours reduced and/or pay cut, making it even harder for families to cover child care costs. A *Raising New York* [survey](#) found parents of infants and toddlers are experiencing intense financial insecurity and skipping meals.

Prior to the pandemic, the average cost of full-time child care for an infant in New York exceeded \$15,000, more than average annual rental costs. [Modeling by The Children's Agenda](#), published in June 2020, showed a typical child care center in NYS seeing revenue drop to 62% of pre-pandemic revenues due to reduced enrollment, social distancing and other public health requirements. To make up the shortfall without public investment, providers would need to raise tuition for private pay middle class families – likely by more than 40%. Even now, with more children returning to child care, the costs associated with complying with new health and safety requirements – particularly maintaining smaller class sizes – are significant. A September 3, 2020 [report](#) by the Center on American Progress calculates that the average cost to provide child care in New York, complying with new state rules, has increased by 31% as compared to pre-pandemic costs. For center-based care, that means an increase from an average cost of \$1,300 per child per month, to more than \$1,700.

Parents with school-aged children struggled to cover afterschool costs before the pandemic, with average costs running about \$96 a week for one child in afterschool care. Those costs stand to [double or even triple](#) in the many communities across New York (and the nation) where schools are offering hybrid or remote instruction this fall.

Compounding the financial challenges remote and hybrid school poses for families are New York State's plans to impose a flat 20% cut to the State portion of school funding to all of New York's districts due to its significant budget deficit. Already, the State has withheld a [portion of July and August payments to schools](#), and announced it will be cutting State aid for pre-K by 20%. As explained in an August [report](#) by the Alliance for Quality Education, the current withholding of aid, and proposed future cuts, will have the sharpest impact on New York's poorest districts because they rely most heavily on State aid. The July and August withholding of payments has prompted poorer school districts, most of which serve predominantly Black and Brown students, and are located in some of New York's lowest income communities, to abruptly [alter](#) their reopening plans, shifting to holding more – or all – of their instruction virtually for [budgetary reasons](#).

The Unique Challenges COVID Presents, Leaving Many Families Vulnerable to Losing Pay, or Their Jobs, Should Schools or Child Care Suddenly Close or Shift to Virtual Learning

No matter how carefully schools plan for reopening, they may need to close temporarily or shift to virtual learning with no notice, should a student or teacher test positive or budget shortfalls prevent schools from safe provision of in-person instruction. Accordingly, robust and flexible paid family leave is critical to ensuring children have the support and supervision they need to succeed with remote instruction, and families have financial and job stability. Parents faced with a sudden school or child care closure must be able to miss work to care for their children without risking their job or financial stability. Under the federal Family First Act, the federal government created a special [pandemic paid family leave](#) that is available to parents unable to send their child to school or child care for pandemic-related reasons, including school closures.

However, [federal paid pandemic leave](#) does not cover private sector employers with more than 500 employees and it allows employers with fewer than 50 employees to secure an exemption under certain circumstances to having to provide leave to a family facing child care issues; the law also contains potential exceptions for health care providers and emergency responders.³ Accordingly, New York parents employed by large employers, and those who may fall into an exemption from the law, will likely be unable to access paid leave should their child's school or child care program temporarily close or shift to on-line education for COVID-related reasons, including budget shortfalls.

Even for those covered by the federal Families First law, the law only provides up to 12 weeks of leave in a 12 month period. Given how hard and suddenly the pandemic hit New York last spring, there are likely many parents who have already maxed out on their 12 weeks of leave to care for a sick family member, or a quarantined child, or a child without school or child care. In addition, without Congressional Action, the leave provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act will sunset at the end of 2020, leaving parents without protection if school and child care closures continue into 2021.

Recommendations

Safe, high-quality education and early care and learning are essential to New York's reopening and recovery. We urge federal and New York leaders to immediately implement – and fund – the following to ensure the safe and successful reopening of our schools and our economy.

Recommendations for the New York Congressional Delegation, and all federal leaders:

- ▶ Pass a federal relief bill without delay; the challenges facing families, schools, child care providers, are growing each day.
- ▶ Include at least \$50 billion for child care to enable providers to continue operating, or to reopen, at reduced capacity to allow for social distancing; to cover the additional costs associated with keeping facilities and materials disinfected; to allow providers to make necessary infrastructure improvements, like partitioning rooms to create smaller, more contained classrooms; to provide essential workers quality, safe, free, or low-cost child care; and to ensure that child care is available to other workers as states begin to reopen.
- ▶ Close the gaps in the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act to ensure all parents can take the paid leave they need to respond to school and child care closures during this crisis as included in the House-passed HEROES Act (along with other improvements to FFCRA). Consider expanding the maximum number of weeks of leave an employee is eligible to receive in a twelve-month period given the ongoing health crisis.
- ▶ Fund state and local educational agencies to adequately support student and educator needs to enable schools to reopen safely. As noted above, inadequate funding is already impeding school reopening plans in New York, hitting poor, and Black and Brown communities hardest. Provide \$175 billion for K-12 education; \$135 billion for higher education; and \$33 billion to governors to help cover remaining gaps.



Recommendations for New York State leaders:

- ▶ Act swiftly to provide resources to families and the educators and child care providers that serve them; the uncertainty around school reopening after months of juggling work and caretaking responsibilities, is pushing many families to the brink. Should a new federal relief package be released, distribute those funds to families, educators and providers without delay.
- ▶ Require child care and SACC be represented at all State and local decision-making tables determining the operation of schools during the pandemic. Schools, child care, and SACC must have input into school operation conversations; none can succeed in safely educating and caring for New York children during COVID without the others.

- ▶ Provide all operating licensed and registered child care and SACC programs emergency grants in an amount determined based on region and modality, and paid out periodically at least for so long as social distancing and other pandemic-related public health requirements are in place. Access should be simple, involve as little paperwork as possible, and available across all modalities of care, communities, and regions.
- ▶ Make the child care subsidy system more centralized, fair, and equitable by expanding statewide categorical eligibility for child care and SACC subsidies for all families experiencing homelessness and foster families. Require that income-eligible families of children with disabilities; families receiving preventive child welfare services; and parents seeking work or pursuing a course of training receive a child care subsidy.
- ▶ Use additional federal child care relief funds, unused subsidy funds, and any other available public funds to require all counties to expand eligibility to 85% of state median income; reduce parent co-pays to no more than 20% of income over the federal poverty level; and pay subsidy for at least 12 absences per quarter plus federal holidays. The State should provide sufficient funds to all counties to cover associated costs, along with the costs of expanding categorical eligibility.
- ▶ Ensure that immigrant families ineligible for federal child care subsidies have access to child care subsidies on equal terms as other New York families.

¹ Information gathered from analyses of the following school district's reopening plans: Buffalo Public Schools, Rochester City School District, Utica City School District, City School District of Albany, Schenectady City Schools, Kingston City Schools, Brentwood Union Free School District, and Central Islip School District, as well as New York City's Department of Education.

² Data on file with The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

³ While New York State has also enacted an [emergency paid sick leave law](#) in response to the crisis, which fills in some of the gaps in the federal law, the state law does not generally cover parents who need to care for a child whose school or daycare is closed due to the crisis. Instead, New York State emergency sick leave can only be taken for caregiving purposes when a worker's child is subject to a mandatory or precautionary order of quarantine, which generally means that the child may have or have been exposed to COVID-19.