



## REOPENING SCHOOLS REQUIRES DOING LESS, BETTER

by George Sugai and Sandra M. Chafouleas

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For educators, families, and communities, the last year has been filled with uncertainty and unprecedented challenge as political unrest, deadly pandemic, social and racial disparities, and violence have disrupted and dismantled our school's traditional approach to education. The appointment of a new [Secretary of Education](#) and the signing of the [American Rescue Plan of 2021](#) suggest hope for a return to "normal" in schools.

Let's reopen schools with a "better normal," one where we do a few highly effective actions really well and avoid the temptation to do way more than is doable. A better normal approach requires us to be scientifically informed as well as contextually and culturally responsive – all of which must be led by school leaders who can decisively and expertly "do less, better."

### Guiding Actions

To do less, better, we offer 7 actions that guide a reopening of schools and result in more meaningful benefits for our children, staff, and families. At the forefront of our actions must be the decisive elimination of practices that have not been "tried and true," doable, and equitable.

- 1. Establish leadership that emphasizes instructionally effective practices and high implementation fidelity.** Decades of research and experience with implementation have highlighted the critical role of leadership in formally establishing a unified organizational vision, language, and experience.
- 2. Prioritize selection of instructional practices and curricula that are tried and true, that is, scientifically documented, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive.** Effective teaching is more than buying the newest and shiniest. Successful educators are cautious when considering the "latest, newest, and shiniest," and instead rely on those core practices they know work and can be adapted to fit the needs and characteristics of their students.
- 3. Organize practices into an integrated continuum to ensure that all students have opportunities to maximize academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical outcomes.** Since few educational practices work for all students, effective schools anticipate adjustments to ensure that some students get whatever additional supports they need. This

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approach has been called “multi-tiered systems of support,” and provides a framework for integrating and intensifying practices so that every student can experience maximum success.

4. **Invest in development of positive classroom and school environments.** Students learn more, report feeling safer, and develop more authentic trusting relationship with peers and adults if the learning and social environments of the school are positive. Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to student needs.
5. **Screen regularly and support formally students who are at- or high-risk related to disability, trauma, mental health, physical needs, etc.** Regular screening has two main purposes, especially during reopening. The first is to identify and support students who present existing academic and/or social-behavioral difficulties. The second is for students who present high risk for developing learning difficulties. In both cases, the goal is to ensure that effective supports are available and promptly delivered.
6. **Use data to guide decisions.** Student performance is our best indicator of effectiveness. By regularly relying on student information about how well practices are working and implemented, schools accurately identify needs and match to appropriate practices, make adjustments, and determine professional development priorities.
7. **Regularly and systematically eliminate ineffective implementation efforts.** Even well-intentioned and evidence-based practices will fail and even harm if not implemented accurately, humanely, and equitably. By eliminating ineffective efforts, educators direct their attention and energy toward better and sustained implementation of high-quality practices for all students, especially, those with high risk.

## The Critical Role of Leadership

We know that successful school reopening is not possible by merely telling educators to follow these guiding principles. What is required is visible, assertive, and engaged leadership from superintendents, principals, and teacher-leaders. These leaders guide by example, are able to defend and document their actions, and are uninhibited about assuming responsibility for successes and glitches.

### Recommendations

Given what we know about effective leadership, where we are at the present time, and where we want to be moving forward, school leaders must

- Communicate, model, and practice a clear and unifying vision that focuses on the client’s outcome, that is, student learning that is measurable and student focused.
- Develop procedures, routines, policies, manuals, etc. that document and unify their business operations, that is, staff and student policies and procedures that guide and foster accountability.
- Ensure that the tools, materials, equipment, and supplies are directly related to student benefit and are the best available, that is, curricula that are cost-effective and defensible.

- Arrange for continuous training on new technologies, that is, professional development that is embedded within typical school routines (e.g., regular meetings).
- Regularly extent of student benefit and accurate practice use to guide their decision making, that is, student achievement, learning progress, and implementation accuracy.
- Continuously search for more effective and efficient ways of conducting business, that is, follow current education and behavioral psychology research.
- Regularly and openly communicate and engage, that is, interact with students and family, school, and community members.
- Openly and regularly encourage and recognize employee initiative, progress, and production, that is, acknowledge use of effective teaching practices and measures of learning outcomes.
- Advocate for, promote, and disseminate the positive and successful qualities, outcomes, and successes of school efforts, that is, inform district and state education leaders.

## Doing Less, Better

Given the unprecedented challenges and crises in our nation, schools are experiencing the added burdens of tighter budgets; layoffs of nurses, school counselors and psychologists, social workers, and paraprofessionals; increasing need to support students with disabilities, mental and physical health, family unemployment and food and housing shortages; and staff members with their own wellness, family, and trauma issues.

The President’s executive order highlights the importance of school reopening and gives educators and school leaders, in particular, an opportunity to respond aggressively.

School leaders must **do what has high probability of working**. We have limited time to try, pilot, or investigate novel and untested practices. We have a robust research base of practices related to, for example, school-wide systems of support and problem-solving, effective instruction, social-emotional-behavioral interventions, and positive classroom and school climate.

School leaders must **catch them early**. We cannot wait for problems to surface or worsen, issues to resolve themselves, or react when they occur. We know that more students will come to school behind in their achievement and with personal, family, and community trauma. So, we must be prepared for we know students will bring to the classroom.

School leaders must **positively teach to learn**. Although punishment might signal students that they have made an error or misbehaved, harsh physical, emotional, or verbal consequences do not teach or strengthen a better or right way, especially for students who are at high risk for academic and/or social behavior failure. Learning and doing a better way requires that teachers provide students with frequent and regular opportunities to see, practice, and experience positive successes.

Finally, school leaders must **always make decisions by considering diversity, equity, and inclusivity**. Education has not been successful in addressing disparities and inequities associated with racism,

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sexism, and ableism. At this time, we must ensure that every student and their family members and educators have equitable access and opportunity, which requires attention to longtime marginalized groups.

Students and their families, and educators need positive engagements more than ever, and especially with the challenge and opportunity presented by the President's executive order. We have been bombarded by negative experiences through combative social media, community unrest and disruption, violent antisocial modeling by leadership, etc., and we know that achieving a better normal is impossible with more of the same. A better normal is possible if school leaders and educators engage in frequent, positive, authentic, culturally and developmentally relevant initiations, engagements, and acknowledgements.

We assert that our children, families, and educators and ourselves deserve and demand a reopening response which is relentless, smart, efficient, and deliberate. Given the current risks and challenges, we do not have the luxury of simply restoring previous routines, taking time to implement, or adding to what was done in the past. School leaders must **do a few tried and true things really well**.

*Doing less, better means doing a few tried and true things really well.*

## About the Authors

Additional information about guidelines and practices may be requested by contacting the authors.

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