

# How Schools in Other Countries Have Reopened

*Madeline Will*



Students at the Taipei American School in Taipei, Taiwan, perform *The Little Mermaid* in full costume and masks.

—Photo courtesy of Dustin Rhoades/Taipei American School

Schools around the world began reopening weeks ago, giving education leaders in the United States different playbooks to study as they wrangle with how to bring students back into buildings this fall.

While no other country has been hit as hard by the COVID-19 pandemic as the United States, the early stories of reopening schools in other countries signal a path forward. District leaders here can adapt strategies used by educators in other countries to maintain social distancing and keep students safe. Education Week spoke to educators in Australia, Denmark, and Taiwan to learn about the measures and precautions they are taking as students return to school.

## **New South Wales: Starting With One Day a Week**

Educators in the Australian state of New South Wales were worried: After schools transitioned to remote learning in March, there was a significant reduction in calls to child protective services. They couldn't guarantee the safety—or the learning—of some of their most vulnerable students.

To make sure students were regularly seeing their teachers, schools resumed in-person instruction one day a week starting May 11. That way, schools could maintain social distancing without restricting return to only certain grade levels. Students continued with distance learning the other four days. (Even during the shutdown, school buildings weren't officially closed—but the government encouraged parents to keep their children home if they could.)

“We really felt that every student deserves that connection with their teacher, that there wasn't a single year of schooling that we would want to miss out from that,” said Georgina Harrisson, the deputy secretary of educational services at the New South Wales Department of Education.

## HOW WE GO BACK TO SCHOOL



District and school leaders are confronting difficult, high-stakes decisions as they plan for how to reopen schools amid a global pandemic. Through eight installments, Education Week journalists explore the big challenges education leaders must address, including running a socially distanced school, rethinking how to get students to and from school, and making up for learning losses. We present a broad spectrum of options endorsed by public health officials, explain strategies that some districts will adopt, and provide estimated costs.

### [Read Part 1: The Socially Distanced School Day](#)

Individual schools could decide how to manage the rollout. Some had each grade level come in on certain days, while others divided students up alphabetically by their last name. The education department asked that schools consider keeping siblings together to make it easier for families, Harrisson said.

The department recommended that schools aim to have about 25 percent of their students on campus a day—giving them a slight buffer so that students who needed to, like children of essential workers, could be on campus every day. Schools were to try to keep class sizes between 10 to 15 students, depending on the size of classrooms, but Harrisson said that some schools repurposed bigger spaces, like libraries, into classrooms and were able to fit more students while maintaining social distancing.

Schools also took other safety precautions as students returned. They staggered arrival and departure times, as well as recess and lunch, to prevent crowds of people in one area. Custodians now also do extra cleaning of high-touch surfaces during the day, and enhanced cleaning at night. Playground equipment can only be used if it can be cleaned after each use, and water fountains are only to be used for filling up water bottles.

The education department also made sure every school has a thermometer in case students report not feeling well, Harrisson said. But the department has not recommended temperature screenings or that students or staff wear masks based on the advice of the state's health

department. Schools have also not made any adjustments to school buses and transportation.

“The main issue we’re trying to solve for isn’t the students,” Harrison said. [“Research into our early cases in schools](#) showed a very low transmission rate in schools. Our main issue is ... adult-to-adult transmission. Our main advice is about adults needing to socially distance during these times, that our teaching staff needs to think about the staff room differently. They need to not be gathering in the way that they might be used to gathering on site.”

On May 25, schools reopened full-time. Harrison said starting with a one-day week allowed everyone to get “confident and comfortable in returning to school.” Also, if there is an additional outbreak of the virus, it will now be easier for schools to reverse course and go back to one or two days a week, she said.

“Having the phased return allowed us to give parents a strong signal of our expectations,” she said. “If this goes well and you work with us on this one day a week, there is another day coming your way, if not multiple days, if we get on top of the virus. It really helps with the behavioral economics of it—the behavioral cues you want from the community and their engagement and support of the approach you’re taking.”

## Denmark: Students Stay in an ‘Enclave’

Students returned to the Copenhagen International School in waves and stayed in their classrooms in bubbles.

When the private school reopened on April 15, only prekindergarten and elementary students returned. On May 18, when the government eased restrictions, grades 6-10 returned, followed by 11th graders on May 27. High school seniors will not come back, as they have already met their graduation requirements.



Claus Moeller, principal of Stengaard School in Gladsaxe, Denmark, prepares for the reopening of his school after the coronavirus lockdown in April.

—Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

When the first wave of students returned to school, strict social-distancing rules were put in place, said Sandy Mackenzie, the school's director. Elementary classrooms were limited to 10 students and one teacher. To create these smaller class sizes, the school reassigned single-subject teachers (like art teachers) to act as homeroom teachers. (With more students now on campus, and loosened restrictions, elementary class sizes are now slightly bigger—up to 15 students, but mostly groups of 12.)

Typically, elementary students go to different electives and classes throughout the day. But now, they stay in their “enclave” all day. The single-subject teachers create lessons that either the homeroom teacher will lead or that can be played on the Smartboard. Instead of collaborative seating at tables, students sit at their own desks, which were initially spaced six feet apart. They each have their own classroom supplies, and there is no sharing allowed.

Students also eat individually packaged lunches in their classrooms, to avoid gathering in the cafeteria. The school has assigned bathrooms and entrance points to the school building to groups of students to prevent bottlenecks. Hand-sanitizing stations are at every entrance and exit. Water fountains have been shut down, and instead there are stations where students can fill their water bottles. The Copenhagen International School canceled school buses for the rest of the year. Students instead arrive by bicycle or personal car.

The Danish government has not recommended wearing masks. Mackenzie said he told students and staff that if they want to wear one, they can, but nobody has. The school does not check students' temperature before they enter the school building. Instead, parents are told to keep their children home if they display any symptoms of COVID-19.

Recess still happens, with social-distancing measures put in place. Classrooms are split into smaller groups of five students each, and students are only allowed to play with the other children in their group. There might be multiple groups of students outside at once, but the children stay in their own bubbles.

“We can't expect children to behave like adults,” Mackenzie said. “We still expect them to play.”

Even so, there are some restrictions: The school has removed all balls for sports and has limited contact activities. The school's communications director, Ida Storm Jansen, [told NPR that](#) instead of playing tag, students play shadow tag, where children “tag” each other's shadow so they won't touch.

Before schools reopened, Mackenzie said teachers were concerned that students would struggle to follow the rules. Administrators told parents they would send home any student who is not complying with the social-distancing measures. However, other than the occasional time-out, educators haven't had any issues with student behavior.

“The adaptability and compliance with the rules and expectations from our young people has been amazing,” Mackenzie said. His advice to school leaders in the United States: Focus on the core business of the school. Limit extraneous activities to keep the logistics “as simple as possible.” And try to maintain some normalcy for students so they feel comfortable.

“We've got to reassure each other and give each other confidence that what we're doing is

right,” Mackenzie said.

## Taiwan: Masks Required at All Times

Masks are now a way of life at the Taipei American School, and that has eased the pressure of maintaining social distancing, school leaders said.

The Taiwanese government provides all adults nine masks every two weeks, and all children 10 masks every two weeks. During the school year, the private school gives staff members an additional five masks every two weeks so they can have a new mask every day.

“In this culture, a majority of people are very used to putting on a mask any time they’re sick—it’s the concept that I’m actually protecting everybody else, not myself; I’m more concerned about the community as a whole instead of my own personal preferences,” said Grace Cheng Dodge, the deputy head of school. “With this pandemic, it was very easy to tell the entire community, masks on at all times.”

The school, which serves students in prekindergarten through 12th grade, was closed for most of February and then stayed open—except for a two-week spring break—until summer break began on May 29. During that time period, families had to fill out travel surveys—if anybody in their household traveled to another country, or came into contact with another international traveler, then they had to report it to the school, and their child might have had to stay home for two weeks.

The school conducted mandatory temperature checks for everyone upon entering the school building or boarding school buses. Staffers did more than 3,000 temperature readings a day, said Larry Kraut, the chief operating officer. The school bought about 80 “thermometer guns,” and asked staff to volunteer to man the stations. (Hourly workers are paid extra.)

A student with a fever of more than 37.4 degrees Celsius (99.3 degrees Fahrenheit) would be pulled into a screening room where a school nurse would validate the temperature and, if necessary, send the child home. In 57 days of temperature screenings, only 10 students recorded a fever, Kraut said.

There are now also alcohol-based hand-sanitizing stations throughout the campus, and people are required to use them before entering the school building. That has been a large cost, Kraut said. Cleaning has also been ramped up: During the school year, surfaces are cleaned nightly with a bleach solution, and during the day, custodians use an alcohol-based solution to regularly wipe down high-touch surfaces like doorknobs.

The Taiwanese government has advised that people stay nearly five feet away from each other indoors—unless they’re wearing masks properly. Cheng Dodge said the school’s mask requirement has alleviated the pressure of making sure desks and chairs in classrooms are spaced far apart, but the school already had small class sizes.

The biggest changes have been made in the cafeteria, since students take off their masks to eat. The school rented tents for the courtyard to expand the eating area. Gone are the salad bars and buffet lines. Meals are now pre-packaged and sealed, and students are handed their lunch by a cafeteria worker so they’re not touching anything.

Students are still allowed to play during recess with masks on. Teachers remind students to

take a break and drink water, so they don't overheat. They call it a "chin break," when students step away from the other kids and pull their masks down to their chins when they get hot, Cheng Dodge said.

Student-athletes are allowed to practice with their sports teams, although competitions have been canceled. If students are close together during practice, they wear masks, but if they're running on a track, they can take the masks off and run several lanes apart, Kraut said. The school's swimming pool, however, has been closed.

Other extracurriculars are continuing, too, with some tweaks. Students performed "The Little Mermaid" and "The Rainbow Fish" in full costumes and masks, to no audience—the performances were filmed for their parents to watch later at home. The student choir is still practicing, in masks, but spaced apart on multiple levels of the foyer. And student musicians can play string and percussion instruments, but no wind or brass instruments—keyboards covered those parts.

Now that the school year has ended, school leaders are looking ahead to the fall, when they will likely keep the same precautions intact. If families leave Taiwan during summer break, they are expected by the government to self-isolate for two weeks, and then the Ministry of Education added an additional seven days before children can return to school.

"We've just had to give out all this information and make people understand, if you make the decision to travel, these are the requirements upon return, and please be aware, we expect you on the first day of school—we don't want anyone to disrupt their own learning and opportunities," Cheng Dodge said.

Her strategy is "to give people the facts and the transparency and the data and all the information behind certain decisions. Hopefully, they'll then make the best decisions they can."

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