



PSEA Education Services Division

...IN BRIEF

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Strategies for Room Arrangement and Social Distancing in Classrooms

Many schools across Pennsylvania are returning to in-person or hybrid instruction in the next month. District-approved plans will drive most initiatives to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19, and many policies and procedures established in district plans will focus on maintaining social distance among everyone in school.

Researchers have demonstrated that social distancing is one of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and keep ourselves and our friends, neighbors, and family members healthy.¹ Consequently, the PA Department of Education has issued guidance informing schools that they should implement strategies to limit the number of people in learning spaces and reduce interactions between students. In addition, to the maximum extent possible, schools should separate desks and seating to allow for at least 6 feet of separation among students and staff; allow for meetings to be held virtually; use physical barriers such as plexiglass to reduce transmission risk; and reduce the use of shared spaces. District plans also should ensure safety protocols on buses, in hallways, in outdoor spaces, on field trips, and in any other area where students or adults congregate.²

In addition to following the mitigation efforts contained in an education entity's plan, individual educators may have some flexibility in building a safe and supportive classroom community that incorporates social distancing practices. Building consistent, positive structures and procedures in your classroom plays an important role in ensuring all students develop a positive and healthy routine around social distancing.

Below are possible strategies to build a positive culture of pandemic-related social distancing in a classroom.³

Shared and Common Materials

- Recognize that many materials typically provided to students may need to remain in storage for now. Items that are typically shared widely with quick turnaround among students present greatest challenges for safe use.
- Replace shared manipulatives with inexpensive alternatives distributed to individual students. For example, in place of teddy bear counters, students can use a small bag of corn or construction paper cut-

¹ A comprehensive analysis found that appropriate social distancing reduced the likelihood of viral transmission by about 80 percent. See [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31142-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31142-9/fulltext)

² For additional information about the PA Departments of Health and Education's guidance for social distancing, see [Public Health guidance Regarding COVID-19 for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools](#).

³ Several of these ideas are based upon guidance provided by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and considerations raised in the [Pennsylvania School Reopening Task Force Report](#). For additional information, please consult these resources directly.

outs. At the secondary level, equipment may be signed out by each student for the school year. Students can be responsible for wiping down some equipment after use.

- Create specific bins for returning used supplies. Allow used supplies to stay in the bin for a set period of time to naturally disinfect or disinfect contents of the bin before making supplies available for re-use. For a classroom library, have students return books to a bin rather than the shelf. Allow books to sit for at least 48 hours before re-shelving them.
- Consider encouraging students to access books that can be read online if students have their own electronic device. For students in the elementary grades, consider using Epic Books on tablets or other devices that can be projected, individualized and sanitized.
- For “show and tell” events, have students take a picture at home and post to Class Dojo, Seesaw, Google Classroom, or some other technology approved by your employer instead of bringing objects from home.

Group Learning and Learning Centers

- Consider how to transition small group work and center activities to individual workspaces. Technology and collaborative apps can support socially-distanced group work within a classroom.
- In lieu of small group discussions ask students to complete short individual reflections that can be shared electronically with the class.
- Use shared documents like Google Classroom or another application approved by your employer to support collaborative or group work assignments.
- Deploy classroom response systems like clickers or an app like Kahoot or another application approved by your employer to allow students to see each others’ feedback without discussing in small groups.
- Consider using online collaborative resources approved by your employer to host electronic student learning stations.
- Where physical student grouping is necessary, keep groupings consistent rather than swapping students among groups and ensure students practice distancing within the group.

Location and Use of Space

- For a change of pace, hold activities outdoors if possible.
- Within the classroom, reduce furniture and other objects to create as much open space as possible.
- When students have individual storage needs, create a system for students to approach these storage spaces individually rather than all together. Spread storage spaces—for coats, artwork, etc.—around the perimeter of the room as much as possible instead of consolidating student storage in one place. Have designated bins, chair packs, etc. for materials so that sharing does not occur.
- Reconsider and reduce “teacher only” space to increase square footage available for social distancing.
- Create signage about social distancing in the classroom that promotes an environment of care and community-building, not fear.
- Mark socially-distanced spaces around the door for lining up for entry and exit.
- Mark traffic patterns with arrows around the classroom, for example, everyone moving students around the classroom in a one-way clockwise pattern.
- Designate one space to meet with students individually, and mark six feet of distance between student and teacher in that space.
- Create personal work zones to maximize space and minimize movement.

Classroom Culture and Climate

- Create stretch and movement activities within the 6-foot space a student has. Establish brain breaks to improve learning but maintain social distance.
- Develop sayings and songs and anything else to make this seem typical.
- Schedule virtual activities and events instead of field trips or class visitors to mix things up.

- Last, use charts! The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” could not be more true! Post information so that there are constant reminders, after you have clearly taught and practiced routines and procedures! Last, utilize colored tape to denote clear boundaries, six feet of space, etc.

Conclusion

Reopening school buildings during the pandemic, as many school entities are planning to do, can create anxiety for students and staff alike. However, when it comes to social distancing practices, educators have an opportunity to work together to build school community and provide powerful learning opportunities for students. Working together as a school, grade level team, or content area team, educators can develop resourceful ways to encourage students to socially distance while maintaining pro-social learning environments.

For more Information

PSEA members who have specific concerns about the implementation of social distancing requirements in their classrooms should contact their local union leaders or PSEA UniServ Representative. PSEA members who are seeking additional suggestions of ways to support positive experiences for students in classrooms with social distancing may contact PSEA’s Education Services Division, professionallearning@psea.org.