
STAFFING



SCHOOL REOPENING TOOLKIT: STAFFING

Educators are well-understood to be the most critical in-school factor in a child’s education. It is important to ensure that districts have strategies that allow for educators to thrive in their classrooms, get the support that they need, and have the tools available to provide every student with a high-quality education. This toolkit will layout considerations related to human resources, staffing decisions and ideas to create an inclusive environment for all school and district staff.

All information in the document is non-regulatory guidance issued for general informational purposes only. This document is not intended to constitute legal advice. Because local school board policy and unique facts make dramatic differences in analyzing any situation, the Tennessee Department of Education advises each school district to consult with the local school board attorney for specific legal advice regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school operations.

I. Checklist

Assess the Situation

Contact your HR director and legal counsel

As noted in the TDOE's [guidance](#) on employment decisions, these decisions fall under authority of the director of schools and local board of education through local board policies. The first step, therefore, is to check with your HR director and board attorney to understand any staffing considerations. These are decisions that are included in state statute, State Board policy, etc. and are critical conversations to have in advance of the school year. The state strongly recommends including stakeholders, reviewing district financials, considering school-based and student needs, and engaging with families as they make these decisions. Districts should strongly consider district capacity and what staff might be available to support in a variety of scenarios. For example:

- How will you address and support staff who might be unable to return to a physical building due to existing health concerns, risk factors, etc.?
- How will you handle staff uncomfortable returning to school due to personal or familial health issues?
- Will staff have to or be encouraged to test for COVID-19 before returning to work?
- What will the work expectations be for educators and support staff during any potential classroom-based or schoolwide quarantines? This question should be considered to do two things: (1) determine how educators and support staff can work when on quarantine but not experiencing symptoms while (2) also ensuring staff are not unfairly punished or experience loss of pay due to closures.
- Will staff have to or be encouraged to test or re-test after a quarantine or a positive test is identified?
- Will educators require additional planning time to adapt lessons during remote learning or will that be provided by the district?
- How should you respond if hourly employees request additional work to make up hours missed during the closure?
- Are there any limitations around continuing your partnerships with contractors?

Review your budget to determine any changes to your staffing allocation

Work with your budget director and factor in any and all changes to revenue from the federal, state and local level. From there, consider any implications to staffing that might be considered, given that staffing typically makes up approximately 80%-85% of a district's budget. Impact to students and services should be considered in these conversations and include stakeholders. It will be important to project enrollment for SY20-21, which should mean prioritizing outreach to families. If there are

families not returning to the district or have strong feelings about keeping their child at home via homeschool and not distance learning through the district, adjustments should be made to account for projected resources. Districts have a number of ways to account for potential issues including not filling vacancies generated from retirement, transfers, or resignations. Not filling vacancies may necessitate a different conversation related to staffing models within districts and schools. (Note: Larger enrollment declines or other losses of revenue may require revisiting this topic.)

Review employment policies and the district employee handbook to ensure flexibility

Based on decisions to questions posed above as well as other factors specific to your district, work with your board attorney, human resources director, and staff representatives to make necessary changes to employment contracts and the employee handbook.

A director of schools may want or need flexibility with staffing assignments during this time as way to protect jobs and/or prioritize areas that most benefit students. The director of schools may need to ensure they have the ability to reassign staff, in case of health emergency, to teach remotely or in person, to change assignments based on endorsements, to transfer schools, etc. It is best practice to work with teachers and staff to get input upfront as everyone will want what is best for their students.

All employment contracts should strongly consider adding language under duties and responsibilities that states “all other duties as assigned.” Directors will need flexibility with their staff as there may be things not addressed that unexpectedly arise during the school year.

Understand the immediate needs of staff (people first)

Check in with staff regarding their immediate needs. You may want to bucket your conversations into the following categories:

Health (Physical and Mental)

- Staff who had to work onsite during closure may be experiencing burnout. Review past schedules and responsibilities and consider if any adjustments should be made.
- Listen to safety concerns and share proactive steps the district will be taking to address them.
- Staff may be at a heightened level of stress or anxiety, so consider checking-in on what they need.
- Ask how their families are doing, as they may have experience health or financial stress during this pandemic.
- Consider any support that staff may need to address the trauma their students (or they) faced during this pandemic.

Employment/Job Security

- Celebrate the adaptability of your staff during the end of the 2019-20 school year.
- Hourly staff may be seeking opportunities for more work if hours had been cut (check on how to approach this with your HR director and legal counsel and make sure you understand labor laws around overtime pay).
- Budget cuts are widely reported in the media, so you may want to proactively share what, if any, implications this could have on personnel to ensure they are assured of employment (if true).
- Address rumors and staff questions about any changes to their role/responsibilities.
- Discuss employee engagement opportunities for SY20-21 so that their voices can be proactively heard

Instruction/Professional Development

- What worked for your system to deliver instruction during the SY19-20 pandemic closure?
- What challenges did you face in delivering instruction during this time?
- What do you think your needs are should your district be in a distance learning environment at any point during the 20-21 school year?
- What instructional concerns do you have as we enter the 20-21 school year?
- (For those that participated in Trevecca partnership) What did you learn that you plan to apply in a distance learning environment?
- (For those that participated in Trevecca partnership) What free tools do you plan to apply in a distance learning environment?

*As with all personnel files, ensure any documentation of needs maintains employees' privacy.

Address uncertainty of staff by including them in return preparation (see the Academics Toolkit)

When planning your return, think about critical summer activities that can provide an opportunity to reconnect your district with schools, your schools with educators and staff, and its educators and staff to families who need to feel reassured that their children will be returning to a safe and nurturing environment.

- Develop a representative stakeholder council to redesign school day structures, classroom set ups, and student movement procedures.
- After finalizing redesign plans, incorporate rotations of all educators, staff, and local health care professionals to review and provide feedback to each school's redesign plan.
- After finalizing redesign plans, communicate widely through traditional and social media avenues.

- Schedule in-person and/or virtual open houses in small groups so that parents and families can preview what learning spaces will look like, what materials will be used, how students will move through their school day, and what alternative learning options may look like.

All redesign opportunities should focus on reconnecting and reestablishing relationships with educators, families and students. Sharing reopening plans will help build trust with each stakeholder group. To dive deeper, please review the TDOE Academics re-opening toolkit.

Identify your immediate staffing needs

With the budget finalized, review current vacancy needs after factoring in retirements as well as assessing educators' intent for the 2020-21 school year. Your HR Director should review endorsements or current licensure statuses of any staff potentially entering or leaving the district to ensure all grades and subjects will be covered.

As mentioned above, ensure you are collecting educator voice as you develop re-opening plans in addition to robust communication so that all staff have the information they need to feel safe and prepared to return to the assigned or appropriate setting. Having these engagement conversations may positively influence the decisions made by educators as they express their intent for the 2020-21 school year. Having their voices heard and needs met, will potentially be the tipping point that encourages staff not only to return but to thrive.

Recruitment

Leverage the emergency rule to recruit out-of-state educators and administrators

In light of COVID-19, an emergency rule was passed which allows for educators who completed a preparation program (in-state or out-of-state) in spring/summer 2020 to be recommended for a provisional license without requiring passing scores on required content assessments. This license will be valid for one year, giving the educator time to meet the requirements to maintain a license (via State Board of Education policy on licensure assessments). In addition, the State Board approved modifications to the out-of-state licensure requirements that will allow districts to hire out-of-state, certified educators and administrators (the administrator must have at least one year of experience serving as a school principal) without submitting content assessments prior to being issued a license. This significantly reduces assessment costs as a barrier to entry, while acknowledging the expertise and experience educators bring with them to Tennessee.

Recruit from the TN Teacher Job Connection

In response to the state's strategic plan, *Best for All*, Priority #3 area (Educators) Superintendent Engagement Group, the TN Teacher Job Connection was launched. This initiative provides districts

with a list of educators interested in employment opportunities for the 2020-21 school year. It consists of recent graduates from EPPs, teachers looking to transfer, out-of-state educators and individuals potentially eligible for a permit. Within the first week of this initiative, the TDOE Human Capital teams plans to provide 300 educators to districts to recruit. Similarly, the department also launched a job posting site for districts to use to advertise available positions and application information for educator job seekers to use. More information can be found [here](#).

Request permits and waivers for positions still vacant

After exhausting traditional recruitment strategies as well as the previously mentioned out-of-state licensure flexibility and TN Teacher Job Connection, a district should consider leveraging permits and waivers to fill positions that are still vacant. TDOE may not issue permits and waivers for the 2020-21 school year until July 1st in order to encourage recruitment of certified teachers. Additional information on permits and waivers can be found in the [Educator Licensure Operating Procedures for Districts handbook](#). The TDOE Licensure team within the Office of Human Capital processes all licensures requests at no cost to the educator, which include permits and waivers, within 21 business days, which is amongst the fastest in the country.

Engage with your substitute teacher provider or build your internal pool

Districts may employ their own substitute teachers or they may contract with a third party vendor. In either case, it will be important to ensure your substitute pool is:

- Updated to reflect their current availability.
- Expanded due to potential increases in sick day use during the 2020-21 school year (consider potential expansion via community residents that may still be unemployed due to the pandemic or recent college graduates who have yet to gain steady employment).
- Properly trained in remote learning, district and school policies and has access to all systems if a district decided to employ substitutes in a distance learning setting

Encourage prospective educators to schedule or reschedule Praxis exams

The ETS Praxis series of assessments is a significant component of educator licensure in Tennessee. Educators seeking admission to job-embedded programs, licensed educators seeking to add endorsements to an existing license, previously licensed educators seeking to reactivate an expired license, and educators completing preparation programs are all impacted by test center closures.

An educator may participate in the Praxis at home testing and can learn more [here](#). In person testing is now available at Prometric sites across Tennessee and the country; more information can be found [here](#).

Capacity Building

Build teacher capacity for digital learning and teaching

The TDOE and Trevecca University have partnered to offer a free, optional digital learning and teaching professional development series. It consists of four modules that are self-paced. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive as it features many free resources that can be implemented by an educator in their classrooms. We are also hearing positive stories of this initiative addressing teacher anxiety and improving retention for the 2020-21 school year. The free modules are available until August 1st. More information can be found [here](#).

Build administrator capacity for leading during these unprecedented times

The TDOE and University of Tennessee Knoxville have partnered to offer a free, optional principal professional learning series. This weekly series, which ends later this month, covers multiple topics that our school leaders are facing during these times. All sessions are recorded and will be made available for any of your principals who miss the live sessions as well as your assistant principals and central office supervisors. Each session is eligible for TASL credits. To learn more about this series and watch the videos of past sessions, please go [here](#).

Build all staff capacity around physical and mental health

It will be important for all staff to be educated on the district's protocols for a variety of physical and mental health and safety issues:

- Trainings on symptoms of COVID-19
- Prevention techniques
- New district procedures to prevent and minimize exposure
- Universal precautions when in contact with bodily fluids
- Signs of mental health stress in oneself and co-workers, with follow-up protocols
- Signs of mental health stress in students, with protocols
- Revised trainings due to lapses in services and identification for the following:
 - Mandated reporter obligations
 - Suicide prevention policy
 - Anti-bullying policy
- Impact of COVID-19 on the community, from a public health and economic perspective to provide insight and sensitivity

Onboarding and support for new staff

New staff may struggle to build new relationships, especially if the school year opens in a remote learning format. New staff may also not yet have relationships with teachers and families and thus might need opportunities to connect with them either virtually or in person while observing distancing guidelines.

New staff may also need specific support if a closure occurs. New educators should participate in all available professional development for distance learning while also being assigned a mentor teacher who worked at the school the previous year, regardless of the new teacher's experience level, in order to have a colleague to answer questions and help them adapt.

Ongoing professional development

The professional development needs throughout the school year may be substantial, as educators will have students returning who have experienced significant learning loss and potential challenges or trauma.

The most immediate need for when staff returns will be professional development around any physical distancing procedures. Districts should address staff uncertainty by including them in return preparation. It may also be beneficial to have educators involved in any reopening committee(s) to lead the professional development for their colleagues along with the school principal. These changes will take significant time to process and adapt to, and may take multiple iterations (personal, then as educators, then when students return).

Based on conversations with staff, a professional development calendar should be developed that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities that the 2020-21 school year may bring. Although instructional professional development opportunities will be needed, especially for distance learning environments, all staff will benefit from trainings on staff and student physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Support from administrators for educators and support staff

The close of the 2019-20 school year resulted in an "all-hands on deck" approach as districts launched distance learning (with or without technology). Given that, there is now time to take a thoughtful approach for the 2020-21 school year and it is vital for districts to develop a strategy to best utilize school administrators (i.e. assistant principals and deans) and instructional coaches in a way to support the challenges educators may face in a distance learning environment.

Feedback from your educators and staff will be essential. Many districts gave a survey to staff and the Tennessee educator survey captured additional information. It is strongly encouraged that

districts review any information collected from teams, assess the current needs and local contexts, and then develop action steps to address any supports needed.

Equitable distribution of professional development for all staff

In a distance learning environment, the immediate focus is always on the delivery of instruction for the core subjects. However, if distance learning continues at any point during the 2020-21 school year, professional development and support will need to be customized for educators in special education, English as a Second Language, career and technical education, physical education, arts, foreign languages, etc.

Smaller districts and/or schools may want to consider setting up professional learning communities across schools in their district or across districts in their CORE region for educators who may be the only person (or one of two educators) in a specific endorsement. The exchange of resources, best practices as well as discussing challenges will be helpful for educators of non-core subjects who may feel more isolated than others in a distance learning environment.

Use resources provided by TASP

As all employment decisions are local decisions that we recommend you consult with your board attorney, please take advantage of resources provided by the Tennessee Association of School Personnel Administrators (TASPA). This group exchanges timely resources, address questions districts may be facing and partners with the TDOE Human Capital team to make Tennessee the best state to become and remain a teacher or school leader.

Reflect and Move Forward

Establish a protocol for ongoing needs assessment

The effects of school closure are likely to be long-lasting and far-reaching. For example, staff professional development needs may change in light of recent events, as may their social-emotional needs. Create a protocol for assessing needs on an ongoing basis.

Review statewide guidance around staffing issues

The COVID-19 page on TDOE's website is updated continually with resources for school and district leaders. Visit the FAQs and other resources to understand statewide guidance around staffing issues such as licensure, professional development (including PDPs and TASL credits), evaluation, and tenure in response to school closures.

Communicate with staff

Communicate with staff around the re-opening of schools. Include in your communication:

- When staff should report back to work.
- What staff can expect when they return.
- Any guidance and supports around helping staff prepare for students' return.
- Any adjustments to schedules or protocols.
- Any special considerations (e.g., employees on leave).
- Contact information for people that staff may call with questions.
- Opportunities for staff to authentically engage with leadership, whether in a group or one-on-one setting.
- The district's employee assistance program (EAP) or health insurance provider's offerings, including mental health resources.
- Clarity around individual responsibilities in case of another building closure during the 2020-21 year.

Adhere to Federal Guidance

It is possible that, once staff are allowed back to their worksites, that precautions will be necessary to reduce any lingering risks. Your plan should ensure adherence to the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Tennessee Department of Health, and other public health authorities on appropriate steps to take relating to the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The plan must also safeguard the rights of all employees provided in state and federal law, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has issued new guidance on the pandemic and the ADA found here.

II. Best Practices

Understand Legal Guidelines

Confer with your HR director and board attorney around staffing decisions during this time to ensure those decisions are in accordance with existing contracts, board policies and labor laws.

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-5-716, a teacher, including a teacher on preapproved leave or other type of leave, shall not be charged with a day of leave for any day on which the teacher's school or the school district is closed due to natural disaster, inclement weather, serious outbreak of contagious illness, or other unexpected event.

Assess and Adapt to Changing Needs

Understand that staff needs will change as they adjust to life following extended school closure. These may include personal, professional, or resource needs. As you work to address any appropriate or applicable needs, consider ways to take care of oneself. See the Resources section for ideas.

Increase Communication with Staff

During times of uncertainty, what might feel like over-communication may, in fact, create a sense of order and normalcy that allows staff to feel safe, comfortable, and able to do their jobs. For example, communicate at the beginning of the week what staff can expect in the coming days. Share positive messages frequently, such as through an end-of-week letter to staff. Be visible and connect with your team as much as possible as they look for leadership and clarity from the district, school leadership and one another.

Consider Alternative Models to Address Staff Who May Need Accommodations

Districts and schools should consider different ways to balance safe and healthy school communities, necessary flexibility for staff and students and delivering a high-quality education for all. To accommodate, districts and schools may need to think differently about staffing to ensure all team members are supported and to maximize full and productive employment opportunities for everyone. Some ideas might include strategic staffing models like:

- **Content specialization (multiple teachers).** Because of the varied needs of staff and students, schools may consider having teachers specialize in content and then deliver that content to multiple classes. This would minimize preparation (especially in the younger grades) and allow teachers to teach entire grade levels or grade bands, including those students at home. For example, in an elementary school, there may be one teacher who specializes in reading and social studies and one teacher who specializes in math and science. Those teachers could teach that content to students across multiple classrooms in the same grade or grade band, flipping blocks in the morning for ELA and math, and again in the afternoon for social studies and science. Doing this may ease some of the preparation time for multiple content areas when it is necessary to provide distance instruction to students (who are still entitled to a commensurate education).
- **Instructional delivery specialization.** Many teachers have expressed the need for additional support in virtual teaching. The strategies, pedagogy and training needed to deliver content in a virtual environment are very different than the art of teaching in a classroom where teachers and students are physically present. Different educators may feel more confident in different settings. For schools that are providing options for families and educators regarding learning format, or those who are in a hybrid model, educators could be assigned to the format in which they are most comfortable, or districts could prioritize those who are most effective online to teach in the virtual space while others return to physical classrooms.

- **Master teachers with content specialists.** Note: A handful of districts in the state are already utilizing the “Opportunity Culture” which has developed a framework from which to expand this practice. Several organizations have built off of this work and districts may be interested in exploring more about what this could mean at the local level. Additional information is provided in the Academics Toolkit.
- **Teachers move from room to room (not students).** To reduce traffic and congestion during transition times, schools may want to consider minimizing movement and having teachers move from classroom to classroom. This would require students to be grouped in cohorts throughout the day (or parts of the day). Teachers would need carts that would accompany them between classes and allow for easy disinfection, along with minimal transition times. Please note: students should be supervised at all times, so there should be a plan in place during the points at which teachers are transitioning. Further, teachers who share a cohort of students may need to consider sharing classroom wall space and duplicating posted materials like posters, etc. for all classrooms served.

In all of these cases, relationships matter. Please make sure that your district and school are explicitly identifying the ways in which all personnel who are responsible for students have an opportunity to develop intentional and trusting relationships early in the year.

III. Recommended Schedules and Procedures

The following is an action plan template focused on four areas of leadership that will be important during the transition back to school—**communication, awareness, visibility, and self-care**. For each of these areas, specify the action steps you will take in the weeks prior to and following the return to school.

Prior to School Re opening				
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Communication <i>What will you communicate to staff, and when will you share it?</i>				
Awareness <i>What tools or strategies will you use to understand staff needs, and when will you utilize them?</i>				
Visibility <i>How will you make yourself visible and accessible to staff?</i>				
Self-care <i>What practices will you use to care for yourself while also caring for your staff?</i>				

First Month of School Re opening				
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Communication <i>What will you communicate to staff, and when will you share it?</i>				
Awareness <i>What tools or strategies will you use to understand staff needs, and when will you utilize them?</i>				
Visibility <i>How will you make yourself visible and accessible to staff?</i>				
Self-care <i>What practices will you use to care for yourself while also caring for your staff?</i>				

IV. Resource List

Tennessee Association of School Personnel Administrators

<https://www.taspatn.com/>

Tennessee Department of Education Covid-19 Resource Page

<https://www.tn.gov/education/health-and-safety/update-on-coronavirus.html>

Virtual Talent Guide for Hiring Educators

[https://tntp.org/assets/documents/Virtual Talent Guide-TNTP.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/Virtual_Talent_Guide-TNTP.pdf)

TDOE and UTK Principal Professional Learning Series

<https://www.tn.gov/education/health-and-safety/update-on-coronavirus/tennessee-principal-professional-learning-series>

[PPLS Module 3 PDF: Followers Needs \(Presentation\)](#)

[PPLS Module 3 Remember the Needs of Followers During COVID-19 \(Article\)](#)

[PPLS Module 3 PDF: Leveraging Our Strengths](#)

[PPLS Module 3 Strategies for Remote Working](#)

TN Teacher Job Connection

<https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2020/5/27/tdoe-launches-tn-teacher-job-connection-to-support-teacher-recruitment-and-hiring>

TDOE and Trevecca Digital Learning and Teaching Series

<https://www.trevecca.edu/landing-page/professional-development-tools-for-remote-teaching-and-learning>

Mercer: Leadership, Stress, and the Importance of Self-care

<https://www.mercer.com/our-thinking/career/voice-on-talent/leadership-stress-and-the-importance-of-self-care.html>

Tips to help leaders mitigate stress and burnout

Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19

<https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>

COVID-19 or Other Public Health Emergencies and the FMLA

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fmla/pandemic>

CDC guidance for employers and workplaces on COVID-19

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/businesses-employers.html>

EEOC and ADA Pandemic Guidance

<https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/pandemic-preparedness-workplace-and-americans-disabilities-act>