

## **U.S. Catholic schools weigh safety, educational needs as they wrestle with reopening strategies**

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Weeks before the opening bell, Catholic schools around the country are grappling with how to safely reopen classes while continuing to provide the high-quality, faith-filled education parents and students expect.

After the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered campuses virtually everywhere this spring, Catholic educational leaders say there is a clear preference to return to in-person learning this fall — but the virus' persistence means dioceses, parochial and private schools must also prepare for a possible return to distance education.

“My sense is that most Catholic schools want to reopen in person, and there are a lot of good reasons for that,” Mary Pat Donoghue, executive director of the Secretariat of Catholic Education for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), told FAITH Catholic. “However, some might be located in places experiencing an uptick in cases, and so there is preparation for online learning going on as well.”

Catholic school leaders have spent months working with local experts, parents and taskforces to develop safety protocols and contingency plans, weighing local factors to determine how — and how often — campuses will reopen for the nation's 1.7 million Catholic school students.

In the Diocese of Orlando, which educates 14,300 students across five high schools, 31 elementary schools, seven early childhood centers and a special education school, about 60 people have worked since May to develop a return-to-school plan that includes mandatory masks for students and teachers, regular temperature checks and socially distanced classrooms.

In early July, the diocese surveyed parents and found “an overwhelming majority, about 90 percent, wanted live, in-person instruction with safety precautions,” said Henry Fortier, superintendent and secretary of education for the Diocese of Orlando.

With Central Florida among the recent hotspots for COVID-19 cases, Fortier said more families have inquired about the diocese's virtual option — in which students participate in live classes via video conference — but a clear preference remains for socially distanced in-seat education.

“There's still a lot going on in Florida, and we get a lot of questions from parents,” Fortier said. “In many cases, they just want to know that you're really focused on keeping their child safe, but they still want their school open.”

While Catholic schools performed “beautifully” with virtual instruction this spring, parents recognize that children need face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers, Donoghue said.

“As Catholics, we understand education to be a process of integral formation, taking into consideration the spiritual, intellectual, social and physical needs of a child,” Donoghue said. “The bottom line is that the online environment, which was a necessary tool during the spring, simply can’t serve all of those needs.”

Working parents might also find it difficult to care for children at home — or find suitable child care — as they return to work themselves, Donoghue said.

At St. Mary School in Royal Oak, Mich., a suburb of Detroit, principal Gabriela Bala said the school community is following health experts’ advice by installing touchless water fountains and handwashing stations to limit contact points, marking off floors and positioning desks six feet apart.

All students and staff will be required to mask as they enter and leave the building, as well as in hallways and common areas. Older students will keep their masks on in class, while younger children can remove them — a recommendation based on medical advice, Bala said.

“Younger students’ developmental ability doesn’t allow them to effectively mask for that long of a time,” Bala said. “Are they going to keep them on? Are they going to be touching them all day? It doesn’t set them up for using them well to prevent the spread of potential infection.”

While most dioceses plan to reopen schools in some form — either full time or with hybrid approaches that combine in-person classes with virtual learning — superintendents and principals recognize the need for flexibility amid rapidly changing circumstances.

“I think (uncertainty) has been the hardest part about this crisis,” said Kevin Baxter, chief innovation officer for the National Catholic Educational Association. “If you have an earthquake or a hurricane that hits a community, it’s a fixed event. It passes, and then you have to rebuild. This has been up and down, and the hardest part is we don’t know where any part of the country is going to be two or three months from now.”

Both the NCEA and the USCCB are consulting with schools across the country, offering webinars and video calls to allow diocesan and school leaders to share advice, best practices and tips for everything from building safety to virtual learning tools.

The organizations also are lobbying Congress for funding to assist families and schools with safety modifications, tuition assistance and a host of other pandemic-related needs.

The economic fallout from the coronavirus crisis is hitting schools during the summer enrollment period, and an estimated 140 of the nation’s approximately 6,100 Catholic schools have already closed and will not reopen in the fall, Baxter said.

“That’s about 40 schools above our average for the past decade,” Baxter said. “If the economy doesn’t come back in the next six months to a year, we might see some really tough situations for Catholic schools.”

Thomas Reichenbacher, superintendent for the Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., said teachers did a “phenomenal” job with distance education in the spring, but if schools return to virtual learning, parents “will expect us to step up our game.”

The Diocese of La Crosse is home to 57 Catholic elementary and high schools spread over 19 counties in central Wisconsin. The diocese is leaving most reopening decisions up to individual school communities, but as of now, Reichenbacher said all of the diocese’s schools but one are planning to return to in-person classes five days a week.

Each school is required to have a plan in place should a student or employee contract COVID-19, as well as a plan to return to distance learning should the need arise, Reichenbacher said.

“Definitely the biggest challenge to returning to the classroom is making the physical rooms and school as safe as possible,” Reichenbacher said. “Especially with little children, we’re concerned about maintaining social distance yet still giving good instruction that is from the heart and in the Catholic faith.”

Regardless of whether schools teach in person or online, Reichenbacher said, the priorities remain keeping kids safe while providing an authentically Catholic education.

“We have to make the best decisions based on the information we have, and a lot of prayer, asking for guidance from the Holy Spirit,” Reichenbacher said. “I sometimes ask myself, ‘Why did Solomon get all the luck?’ I could use some Solomon in me right now.”

### **By the numbers**

**Total Catholic school enrollment:** 1,737,297 (1,201,391 elementary, 535,906 secondary)

**Total U.S. Catholic schools:** 6,183 (4,995 elementary, 1,188 secondary)

**School professional staff:** 146,367 (97.4% laity, 2.6% religious/clergy)

**Teacher/student ratio:** 12:1