

Warning: If your school opening strategy is limited to official guidance or inexpensive “Health Tracker” apps ...
DO NOT read this article as it might cause anxiety and sleepless nights.

Failing Grade: 2 key reasons many opening strategies will fail!

Many schools will fail with their re-opening strategy as they pour countless hours into developing and implementing new COVID-19 school opening policies.

Why? It is not for a lack of effort. It is not because the plans lack thoughtful consideration. After all they are based on guidance from sources like the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), state boards of education, local health officials and dozens of other “expert.” It is not because the “guidance” schools are focusing on are not solid risk management concepts. In fact, most guidance is quite good and may bring long-lasting improvements to school policies in years to come. The reason so many schools will fail in their opening strategies is much more fundamental.

Schools will fail for two primary reasons: Fear & Lack of Parent Involvement!

#1 - The Financial FEAR Factor

The economic challenges COVID-19 ushered in through government-mandated shutdowns and high unemployment are significant. Millions of middle and upper-class parents who pay for private education lost their jobs or saw a significant cut in their income. However, fundamental truths still exist no matter the economic climate:

- You get what you pay for.
- You have to have skin in the game.
- That which you help create you will help support.

It's not that school administrators want to exclude parents from school opening activities, it is the fear of asking for parent (financial) support that could sabotage the opening strategies. Direct involvement (volunteering) and financial support are the two most common ways parents contribute to a school community. Schools traditionally set their tuition & activities' fees (books, uniforms, student accident insurance, sports, etc.) between December and February for the following school year. In normal years, the consideration of an “increase” in tuition is something that school leadership agonizes over because the loss of two or three families over a “Tuition Hike” will often eliminate any gain. This year-over-year struggle has created fear-based thinking on what parents are willing to support and what they will not. Ironically, when most schools ask their development department to help raise money for a new building or expansion, they almost always meet their targets with significant parent support.

We have seen that the vast majority of parents are willing, and even eager, to financially support causes they believe in. After all, that is most likely why they choose private education in the first place. Is the safety of their children, classmates and teachers & staff worth supporting due to COVID-19? Of course. And parents are actually willing to support this cause if given the chance.

It is a mistake not to ask parents to help “chip in” for the unexpected expense that schools may face when preparing to open with new COVID-19 related policies and services now in place. Whether it is paying for PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) or a service to engage medical professionals to monitor, consult with and oversee testing of COVID-19 risks on campus, parents are not only willing to support, but they want to be part of a process that has real value. Even if you feel the safety expense would be significant to your budget in the short run, can you afford to pass on a program that many parents would happily pay for and want for the protection of their child, based on your normal fear of asking for more parent financial contribution?

Is \$11 too much? Is \$1,000 too much? There is a point of diminishing returns on what to spend when asking a parent to contribute. However, don't let the FEAR of asking parents to support the safety of their child, their classmates and your faculty & staff cause you to succumb to the fear of asking for support during a once in a lifetime need.

#2 - Lack of Parent Involvement

Is it illogical to think that protecting a school community can be done without the entire school community being invested? The phrase "we are all in it together" only amplifies a lack of true leadership if it rings hollow and school leaders fail to establish the methods by which students, faculty AND parents can contribute.

We have seen a good example emerge as ingenuity responds to meet school administrator needs. There has been a rush to the market of *Health Tracker* apps for schools to use. The apps either (1) help collect data for local health officials or (2) allow schools to ask parents to report on the COVID-19 health status for their children. With a little programming skill, these trackers can be designed & employed quickly, but regrettably may create a false sense of security.

A fundamental tenant of risk management is that efforts to identify risks alone, without reasonable efforts to reduce the risk, can be worse than ignorance in the first place. Knowledge of a risk (i.e.: child health status) without reasonable mitigation can create a legal cause of action. As an attorney, it would/will be all too easy to file legal suit against a school that has knowledge of what will be claimed as a deadly threat (COVID-19) when the school fails to take any (a) substantive and (b) consistent action to minimize the threat.

As it relates to COVID-19, having a health tracker without an accompanying testing strategy or outsourced medical component to act on, the results may not be the wise decision it appears to be on the surface. Tracking the health status of children and staff places a school in the position to make "health decisions" on behalf of the school community. Gathering and storing the health data may provide specific knowledge that would then place a burden on the school to take an action. If your school is going this route, I strongly suggest you contact your General Liability insurance carrier to request an endorsement or determine what extent your policy will cover errors and omissions.

Another challenge with these apps, and guidelines in general, is the lack of direct parental action in the process to be part of the COVID-19 opening solution. If you are asking parents to use technology (i.e. a reporting app) and there is no feedback or interaction that comes with the data, you will most likely see utilization rates fall and the integrity of the program collapse. It is the same concept as putting in place guidance or directives from experts and providing no feedback or forum for parents to understand results or express their feelings. Ultimately, schools taking this route will degrade their efforts because a key component of the school community was not "involved in the process". If the "shock event" (serious diagnosis of COVID-19 resulting in ICU stays or death) occurs, community support can turn against school leadership.

Parents get involved through two primary processes: (1) their wallets and (2) donating their time. In developing your plan to open or re-open, make sure the parental involvement is well thought out and not a plan where parents are just on the receiving end of informational updates and requests.

The SOS (*Stay Open Strategies*) series are legal & medical briefs designed to bring expert advice to school leadership in their efforts to safely open schools for in-class instruction this fall. In the past 30 days, we have spoken to hundreds of school board members, headmasters and other school leaders in our effort to develop a [*Data-Driven and Doctor-Managed*](#) service for schools to utilize for a small \$11 fee that we encourage schools to ask parents to pay and be involved in the COVID-19 community effort. www.imhealthytodayschools.com

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