

The Parent Role in Decision-Making about Returning to In-Person School: At the Individual Level

As your child's parent, you have the most important role in deciding about your child's return to in-person school. You must consider your child's health, especially if they have a special healthcare need that puts them at greater risk should they contract COVID-19. You also have to think about if he or she can comply with health precautions (like wearing a face mask and physical distancing) and what works best for his or her learning. This includes academics, related services, social-emotional learning, and independent living skill development. You also have important insights to share at the school, district, and state level as they make decisions about school reopening.

The National Center for Parent Leadership, Advocacy, and Community Empowerment (National PLACE)

is dedicated to strengthening parents' and family-led organizations' voices at decision-making tables at the individual, program, and policy level.

We hope this mini-guide provides you with the information you need to take an active, informed, and effective role in school, district and state systemic decision-making around school reopening.

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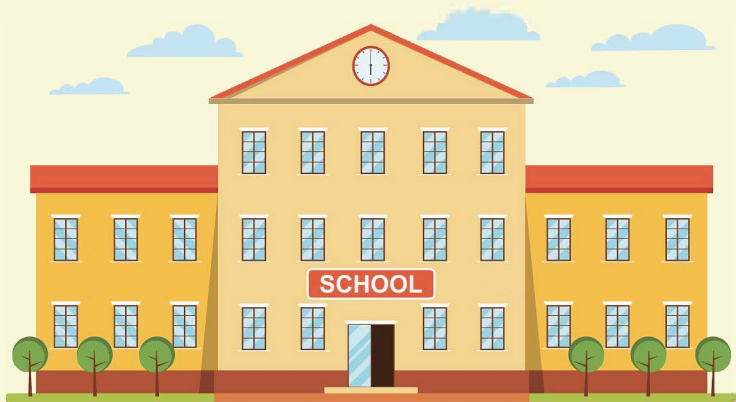
To make a decision for your child, three things are important to know.

1. Your child's circumstances and what that means for attending in-person schooling
2. Your state's guidance or rules about school reopening, including any provisions for parental choice in these options
3. Your district's related guidance or rules.

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An important first step is to become informed





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It's also important to know your rights to participate in education decisions about your child. You should be involved in deciding what is best for your child. You know your child best! There are general rules and laws and policies that require you be an active participant when decisions about your child are being made. And then there are federal laws too:

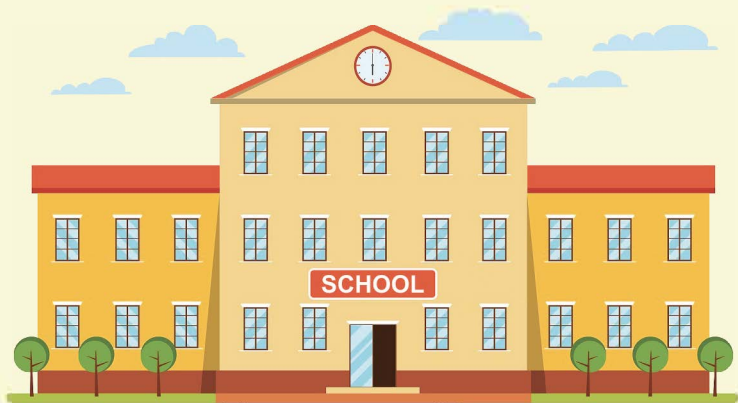
- For children receiving Title services under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act
- For children receiving bilingual education services
- For children with disabilities or special healthcare needs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act

If you don't know all or some of this, please find the Parent Center in your area. They can help you learn and understand your rights. They can also help you think about all of your options as you plan for school reopening. Find your closest Parent Center at <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>.

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Before you make a decision about your child, talk to him or her about their thoughts and feelings about returning to in-person schooling. Talk to the professionals in your child's life (teacher, case manager, therapists, doctor/nurse practitioner, and other health professionals). And talk to others who know your child well (family, friends, religious leader, troop leader, etc.)

What should you be asking for, and of whom? For your child, use the answers to your questions and all available information to partner with your child's health, mental health, and academic professionals. Together this team can make good decisions about whether or not your child should return to on-site schooling. Remember:

- Your concerns must be included in your child's IEP. The threats to your child's health must be considered.
- Make sure that you do not sign away your child's rights to an education. If they have an IEP, advocate for education in the least restrictive environment, such as remote participation in the general education classroom instead of home instruction. Know the difference between learning at home, home instruction, and homeschooling (where you give away your child's rights to education and support services from the public school or district).
- If your child will return to in-person schooling and they have significant health issues, ask for an Individualized Health Plan to ensure that your child's return is as safe as possible. Start the conversation with your child's teacher and if your child has an IEP or 504 plan, with your child's case manager or the person responsible for implementation.



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What should you do if you are not satisfied with the answer(s)? If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive or the decisions that are made, work with your partners to go up the chain of command!

If your child has an IEP and you disagree with the decisions of the IEP team, you may request mediation, a due process hearing, or complaint investigation from your state special education office. If you file any of these requests, your child's IEP – services and placement – cannot be changed until they are resolved. If you need help, contact your Parent Center. If your child does not have an IEP, the chain of command typically goes from teacher to principal to superintendent to district Board of Education to State Commissioner or Board of Education.

For more information on protecting the rights of individual students with disabilities when schools reopen, check out three documents from COPAA:

www.copaa.org/page/reopening;

www.copaa.org/news/516591/COPAA-Releases-New-Recommendations-on-Students-with-Disabilities-and-School-Reopenings.html



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And here is some other useful information we want to be sure you know:

Whether or not your child will return to in-person schooling, if you believe that your child did not receive a free, appropriate public education during this past school year, you can request a meeting to discuss the need for compensatory services. (See SPAN Sample Letter Requesting Compensatory Education Services at

<https://spanadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Sample-Letter-Comp-Svs-GENERAL.pdf>.)

If your child's eligibility for special education services ended this school year, make sure that you received the proper notice and information before your child graduated.

If your child did not receive their needed transition services, and you believe your child should not have been graduated, request an IEP meeting to discuss the need for compensatory services. (See SPAN COVID-19 Graduation Tip Sheet at

<https://spanadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Graduation-tip-sheet-final-PDF.pdf>, and Request for Transition Compensatory Services IEP Meeting letter at <https://spanadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sample-Letter-Comp-Svs-Transition.pdf>).

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The National Center for Parent Leadership, Advocacy, and Community Empowerment (National PLACE) has many resources, tip sheets, and tools you can use to power up your policy advocacy to support your efforts! You can find resources available to all parents and family-led organizations at www.parentsatthetable.org.

For example, find a training and resources on policy advocacy at www.parentsatthetable.org/storage/app/media/resources/How%20to%20Engage%20in%20Policy%20Advocacy/.

Don't sit on the sidelines, get into the game, and use your power and the power of your partners to ensure that children, families, and family-led organizations are at the table in meaningful ways when school reopening decisions are being made.

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