



Transitions: Going Back to School



The past year could be summed up in one word: transitions. One year ago, we transitioned to lives directed by a tiny, aggressive virus that came to be known as COVID-19. Schools closed, businesses closed, and we sheltered in place in our homes. We learned to stay six feet away from others, started wearing masks, and postponed holiday and birthday celebrations. Plus, we experienced big transitions in society, politics, and government.

A year into the pandemic, we've adjusted to our restricted lives and routines. And now, here we are, anticipating and moving into another big transition: reopening our schools. The familiar is about to become unfamiliar—again!

Unfortunately, the timeline for re-opening has been unclear. The roll-out of the eagerly anticipated vaccine is taking longer than we'd hoped, and each school district is proceeding at a slightly different pace. And we still fear catching and spreading the virus, so we very much want to keep our distance.

The transition to online teaching was excruciating in many ways. Educators worked many extra hours to make online teaching happen. They rose to the challenge, learned new software, and adapted as best they could to online teaching. For the most part, newly established routines, relationships, and curriculum have been working fairly well and many students seem to be thriving. Adjustments were made by every employee, from bus drivers to cafeteria workers.

We've grown used to this "new normal." And for many of us, our current "normal" feels safer than the unknowns about going back to in-person classrooms. It's natural to be concerned.

Going Back

Everyone knew going back to in-person teaching was inevitable and desirable. We've been hoping to reach this milestone. It's what's best for kids! But after a year of waiting and wondering, the reality of reopening is coming closer and emotions are running high. A lot of us are anxious. Some folks want schools to reopen as quickly as possible. Others rage against this transition until it can be done more safely. Who is right? Who is wrong? What is the right choice? What is the right timeline?

If there was just one clear answer and one clear date for return, would people be less anxious and worried about going back?

Probably not. Because all transitions tend to come with some level of anxiety. Transition is change—and change is fraught with uncertainty and surprises. It's pretty clear that school will not be the way it was before the pandemic. Consider the uncertainties: Will my building be safe? Will all of us be vaccinated before schools open? Can I adjust my curriculum for in-person teaching? Will I have a new classroom? Will it be a hybrid situation?

Endings

It's important to remember that transitions are about endings and beginnings. There are losses in endings, things you have to give up. You may even be surprised at what you might miss as you return to in-person teaching. In addition to losing some of your at-home control over the health and safety of your family, you may experience other feelings of loss. They may be small or large. Pay attention to them.

- End of sleeping in and being cozy in your own house while you work
- End of being home to take care of your ailing parent
- End of the online curriculum and teaching methods you created and feel good about
- End of the past year's patterns and routines

Beginnings

This transition time can feel both exciting and messy. You—and your students—will be absorbing a lot of "new normal," as a group and as individuals.

- Uncertainty about and adjustment to COVID protocols and safety
- Return to in-class discipline and disruptions—and a noisy classroom
- Return to anxiety over school shootings
- Return to dealing with personality and communication conflicts
- Uncertainty over staffing and relationships

The in-between place

The space between the ending and the beginning is a hard place to be. It's not quite time to let go of the old ways, and at the same time, the "new" has not begun—or is still very new. It will take some time for all of us to grow comfortable with the new "new normal".

Lots of feelings will arise in this in-between place. Fear of the unknown is a big one. Most likely, the fear of returning to school is worse than the actual return will be. The process of determining how and when to return has involved a lot of conflict and some mistrust. Believe that you know how to handle this transition. If you're mentally prepared for a period of possible awkwardness and disorientation, you're more likely to experience a smoother transition.

- Things may feel a bit strange. The past year of our lives has been incredibly different than any previous year. It may feel like coming out of hibernation. You may feel like a different person.
- Don't be surprised if you have a period of low self-confidence and discomfort.
- Be aware that everyone's response to this big shift will be different. Some colleagues might return feeling energized and invigorated—and you may feel just the opposite.
- Acknowledge the things about online teaching that were hard, and the toll it took on you. (See article on COVID guilt.)
- Accept that you did your best and now you need to find your own "best" again.

Be sensitive to colleagues who have experienced tragedies or losses during the shutdown. Reach out with comforting words. Listen. Avoiding hard topics can make people feel more isolated. If you're willing to talk about challenges you faced at work and home, others can feel safe to open up about theirs. And remember, there is no hierarchy of suffering. Just because someone had more losses than you, doesn't mean your own troubles don't matter.

You may be surprised to feel grief during this period of transition. The "old normal" disappeared a year ago, and it won't be waiting for you in the classroom when you return. But maybe you and your colleagues can create something even better—together!

