

# Pandemic Planning for Schools: Adopting and Adapting Public Spaces

*Barrett Feldman, Principal, PSF Projects*

In a world with the Covid-19 pandemic, how do we create a reopening plan for schools that can protect the health, safety and well being of students physically, mentally and emotionally – as well as that of parents, teachers, administrators and community members?

Rules and Guidelines for a safe indoor environment in a world with [Covid-19](#) continue to be written. As an architect and mother, I am searching hard for ideas and answers. Our toddler was supposed to start school full time in June, but we couldn't bring ourselves to enroll him. And so I wonder: how do we get comfortable sending our most precious beings – our children – into buildings when we ourselves hesitate to enter?

Currently much of our political leadership at all levels of government are polarizing along party lines – the school camp vs. the non-school camp. Educators fall into a similar trap as they announce on social media, op-eds and interviews that they should not be sacrificed so that our children have school and people can get back to work. I agree: no one should have to be sacrificed. Educators and parents, some of whom are one and the same, do not need to take sides in a wrestling match.

Instead, let's work on the same side. We are people and we need to put our heads together to solve this problem to get our children educated, cared for and get the rest of society back to work in a healthy way. This attitude opens us up to possibility while the other one leads nowhere. I speak from my own experience with the creative process: being open to

possibility enables me find solutions in places I would not have imagined. We, as a society, as mankind, are in a conundrum where even the best intentions can lead to bad results. So we need a solution that we could not have imagined prior to this pandemic.

As an architect I can develop social distancing spatial diagrams and one-way routes through a building, and employ a variety of tools to improve indoor spaces. My firm PSF Projects contributed to one such study along with several other well-respected architects. We analyzed how to get students safely into a building when the pathway is a single point of entry and a stair. The strategies we developed will improve the indoor environment, but they cannot combat Covid-19 aerosols from landing on us as we go about our daily business. So, the standard tools are not sufficient to rapidly deliver a robust solution. We have to go further.

We must adopt new models of thinking. Agree with the protests or not, we learned that despite outdoor gatherings with tens of thousands of frequently masked people over several months, the daily cases in New York City did not increase. Outdoor dining has been open in New York City for several weeks, and again the case numbers have not increased. Restaurants in southern states that opened for indoor dining resulted in a rapid spread of coronavirus.

If we can figure out how to do outdoor dining in New York City, we can figure out how to do outdoor learning throughout the country. This is going to take collaboration of administrators, teachers, parents, children, community members, both private enterprises and nonprofit businesses, as well as city and state government. I am an idealist, so I think it is possible.

Architects and urbanists can come together to identify and map potential sites, evaluate them, and share recommendations for how to create outdoor classrooms. Administrators and teachers

can then schedule and collaboratively program the heck out of them. The open spaces exist already: they are large and small parks, community center playgrounds, pocket parks, plazas, privately owned public spaces, rooftops, empty stadiums and fields. Private or public – they all are fair game. When those are not available, there is the public space of the street that can be repurposed as we repurpose them for dining. Naysayers would say the liability is too great. I say the liability of community transmission of Covid-19 is too great. Again, we have to approach this as human beings grappling with a new reality. Stay at home parents may volunteer, working parents may be granted a free afternoon to volunteer as a chaperone, retired and masked adults can come out to share their wisdom, and the list goes on. We can work together to make the next six months, if not year better than ever.

Education can shift to become even more local during the pandemic. Instead of students being bussed to a school or riding the subway, the location of learning is within walking distance. We can take field trips, plant gardens, and learn through being together and in our shared community- whether it be rural, suburban or urban. This cannot be done easily. Teachers cannot seamlessly revise all of their lesson planning to accommodate this new way of learning, but I am certain of two things: First, our children will learn more by being outside with each other than indoors learning in front of computers while their parents manage full time work. Second, it is our collective responsibility to figure out how to get our children back to learning and our adults back to work so that lines at foodbanks don't keep growing and beds for homeless don't keep increasing. Yes, we wish our government could figure this out, but they don't seem to be, so we have to make it happen and they will have no choice but to follow.

Everything needs to shift. We need to improvise. We need to collaborate. We need to establish new rules and guidelines that never existed except maybe in small pockets of Outward

Bound Schools, Forest Schools and distant Scandinavian countries. Who knows, at the other side of this pandemic we might even decide that taking care of each other, enjoying the outdoors, experience learning and collaborating as a community is a warmer, richer, and kinder world.

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**About the Author:** Barrett Feldman is a mom and a principal in the New York City based architecture firm PSF Projects where she works on the design of single family homes, schools and nonprofits. She believes architecture has the power to positively impact and improve people's lives, organizations and communities.