

# COVID: Will Bay Area schools be back or still have 'distance learning' this fall?

Decision looms on allowing remote instruction in fall



GILROY, CA – MARCH 25: Dylan Keef, 12, left, and his mother Jennifer Keef, the rally co-organizer, hold up signs during a rally to reopen Gilroy schools at the intersection of Santa Teresa Boulevard and Highway 152 in Gilroy, Calif., on Wednesday, March 25, 2021. About two dozen parents and students took part in the event to reopen schools. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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As frustrated as she is watching her boys stare for hours at teachers on a computer screen while virus cases plummet and California reopens, an even greater worry weighs on Jennifer Keef: Will this still be the Gilroy Unified school experience in the fall?

Gov. Gavin Newsom and other state leaders say they “expect” campuses to reopen fully in the next academic year that will start in August, and note that the state authorization allowing remote “distance learning” during the pandemic expires at the end of June.

But Gilroy Unified and other districts want to keep a partial online “hybrid” teaching format on tap should virus cases erupt again, and have distance learning as an option for families who want it. That has parents like Keef – who are eager for a full school reopening – on edge.

“They keep on saying, ‘Our plan is to open fully, but we want to have a backup plan,’” said Keef, whose boys are in second and seventh grade. “So I just don’t see it actually happening.”

Though [California boasts the lowest COVID-19 rate](#) in the U.S., it also has some of the fewest fully open public schools. A recent [EdSource analysis](#) of state data found just 13% of public school students have returned to a normal five-day-a-week school schedule.

That has angered many parents whose kids have struggled emotionally and academically with remote learning and helped fuel a Newsom recall election in the fall. A recent [Public Policy Institute of California poll](#) found that while most California adults and public school parents approve of how Newsom and school districts handled pandemic closures, majorities say remote learning has hurt kids academically and are concerned schools won’t fully reopen this fall.

A battle looms in the state Legislature in coming weeks on whether to extend the permission for distance learning as Newsom unveils his annual update to the proposed state budget. Lawmakers must approve the budget by mid-June.

The California School Boards Association, which represents board members of nearly 1,000 districts, is lobbying for schools to continue to have the option of distance learning.

State law already has independent study provisions that allow for limited virtual academies, but school boards don’t want their hands tied if they choose to offer a broader remote option, said Troy Flint, the association’s spokesman. It’s not just the virus that threatens to close campuses, he said, noting California is facing another potentially big season of wildfires and harmful air quality from their smoke.

“In the modern era, we need to have multiple methods of serving different students with different needs,” Flint said. “The 19th-century model we’ve been operating on all these years doesn’t serve all families all that well, so we need to have a variety of approaches.”

The school boards have the ear of Sen. Connie M. Leyva, D-Chino, who chairs the Senate Education Committee and the Senate Democratic Caucus.

“I believe that we will continue to need – beyond June 30th – a virtual option for families that are not yet ready to send their students back to full in-person instruction or for students who don’t thrive in a traditional school setting,” Leyva said.

Assemblyman Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, the budget committee chairman who has called distance learning a disaster and worked with Newsom on compromise legislation in March to encourage schools to reopen faster, sees no need for that.

He blames distance learning for the past year’s [sharp enrollment decline](#) of 160,000 mostly elementary students, and says the state’s sluggish pace of reopening schools proves that giving districts “the flexibility to open and close doesn’t work.”

Newsom's office said in a statement that given the state's progress in vaccinations and reducing virus case rates, the governor "expects schools to be fully reopened for 100% in-person instruction in the fall."

But parents who want to see their kids back in the classroom – with a teacher, five days a week – aren't convinced.

Gilroy Unified, which only reopened elementary grades in a hybrid format in mid-April, decided to keep its middle and high school students in remote learning for the remainder of the current academic year.

Other Bay Area districts also have indicated a need to keep the distance learning option.

San Francisco Unified passed a resolution affirming the "firm intention to ensure all students are able to attend full-time, five days a week, in-person learning on the first day of school, August 2021." But it also cited a need for "backup plans that adhere to anticipated public health guidelines in the event that community transmission rates rise."

Oakland Unified said that "we are planning for full, in-person instruction, five days a week, for all students," but also that "we are planning for a distance learning option for this fall."

Cupertino Union, where angry parents mounted a trustee recall campaign, plans "a return to an in-person schedule that includes five days of live instruction at all schools." But it's also exploring a "choice" program "for families who are interested in distance learning for the full 2021-2022 school year."

Val Ryabov, parent of a Cupertino Union district student, said the district "has been a bit cryptic" about whether the fall is "normal" as in "pre-COVID" versus "new normal" with more computer screen time in the room.

"We just have not seen leadership that prioritized children's needs all year in most California school districts," said Megan Bacigalupi, whose sons attend elementary school in Oakland Unified. Bacigalupi is an organizer with Open Schools California, which has sent some 1,500 emails to lawmakers urging a full fall reopening. "So until kids are actually back for five full days, many parents will be understandably skeptical."

That includes Keef.

"They've set metrics for us to open this school year; we met those metrics and we didn't open," Keef said. "So how am I supposed to think what they're saying now is going to happen?"

Source: [COVID: Will schools stick with distance learning this fall? \(mercurynews.com\)](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/08/27/covid-will-schools-stick-with-distance-learning-this-fall/)