

## Where, and how, are schools reopening in the United States?

This report provides a high-level overview of shifts in school closures policies in 50 US states, Washington D.C., and the Virgin Islands using data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker. It will be updated every two weeks to track trends in Fall 2020.

<b>Indicator</b>	C1 - School Closures
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Date Range</b>	September 1 to September 15
<b>Reported by</b>	Laura Hallas, Anna Bruvere, Tetsekela Anyiam-Osigwe, Laura Chamberlain, Laura De Lisle, Zoha Imran, Mareeha Kamran, Andrey Krachkov, Saptarshi Majumdar, Mariam Raheem, Anthony Sudarmawan, Anna Welsh

## Executive summary

As the US emerges as an epidemiological and political focal point of the Covid-19 pandemic, the beginning of fall K-12 and university school years marks an important next stage in US Covid-19 policy. This report summarizes OxCGRT data gathered on US states, DC, and the US Virgin Islands to assess trends in school reopenings from September 1-15. Key findings include:

- School reopening levels saw more convergence among states following the more varied period of August school reopenings, with targeted required closures at some levels (2T) the most common policy.
- 10 states further reduced school-related containment policies in September, with Northeast (4) and Midwestern (3) states accounting for most new changes.
- K-12 reopenings drove decreases in school reopening policy stringency, though universities have continued to generate interest as Covid-19 clusters emerge with campus reopenings.

These preliminary findings are highly relevant as September and October school reopenings continue in the US and around the world. This policy note will be updated regularly as school reopenings (and potential new closures) evolve.

## Fall School Reopenings by State

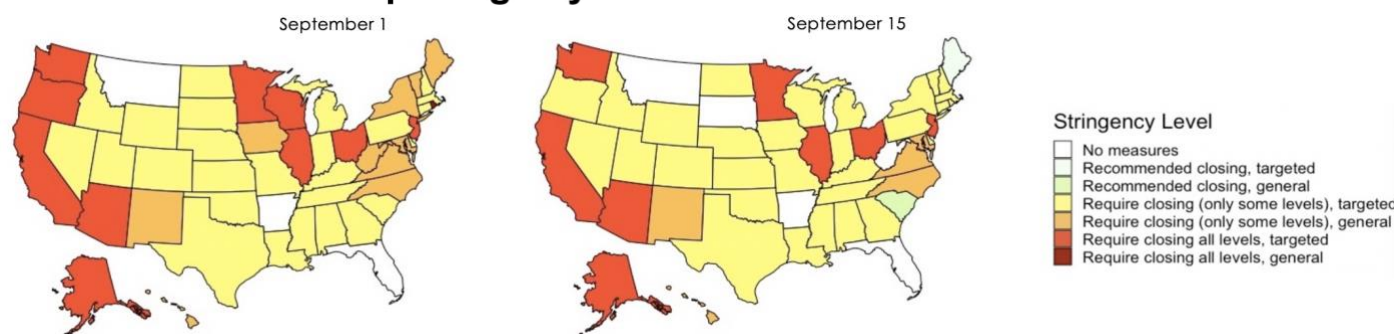


Figure 1. September 1 and September 15 OxCGRT school closure policy levels

## Context

### A decentralized education system

US education is highly decentralized, with control resting primarily with states and local districts [1]. Schools are stratified by K-12 levels covering ages 5-18, and higher education. Schools are further divided by public (tax-funded) or private (tuition-funded) status, with students at all levels more commonly attending public institutions [2]. Universities are more autonomous than K-12 school districts, though public universities especially are subject to state oversight [3]. The US school year generally begins in August/September with a spring break in March and summer break beginning May/June. Summer courses do take place, though only a small portion of students attend.

### August reopenings concentrated in the South and West, led by universities

August reopenings were concentrated in the Southern and Western US, with wide regional variations month partially due to typical features of school reopening dates. Notably, the 20 states that experienced school stringency reductions from August 1 to August 22 accounted for less than half the US population (45%) but more than half of August's new cases (55%). Universities led August reopenings, with almost all states reporting universities as holding some in-person instruction. As a consequence of this earlier opening period and university-specific features such as the clustering of students on and off campus, some universities experienced a cycle of reopening, Covid-19 outbreaks, and closures earlier on than have K-12 levels. University of North Carolina and SUNY Oneonta were examples of universities experiencing this cycle.

### Ongoing policy and health debates

The beginning of September saw continuation of school reopening debates. Concern for health and safety of teachers and students has remained a prominent issue, heightened by August debates over feasibility of different reopening plans. Indeed, some school districts with anticipated start dates in early September had delayed the start of in-person instruction [4]. Three prominent concerns related to K-12 reopenings include inadequate internet coverage and low attendance of students (particularly in rural and low-income areas), and the impact of school closures on working parents' childcare options [5, 6] The OxCGRT database recorded several policies intended to address these concerns, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Pennsylvania's announcements of investments in internet connectivity for remote learning.

Universities have dealt with an equally pressing set of challenges as students continue to demand reduced tuition for online courses, with many universities are facing lawsuits arguing for reduced tuition [7]. Moreover, universities struggle to monitor student behavior outside of campus such as large off-campus gatherings and parties, including within Greek life—the system of social organizations on college campuses where students often live in large groups [8].

## Continued Fall School Reopenings in September

From September 1 to 15, 10 states showed a reduction in OxCGRT's 4-point ordinal school closure indicator (C1), with 6 experiencing an ordinal reduction valued at one or more (see appendix for further explanation of calculations). Within the 52 subnational jurisdictions, the most commonly coded level was of targeted, required closures at some levels, with the number of states reporting this code increasing from 26 to 30, a change largely driven by an increase in K-12 reopenings. On September 15, five states (Arkansas, Florida, Montana, South Dakota, and West Virginia) had reached the lowest level of stringency, with no restrictions on school openings.

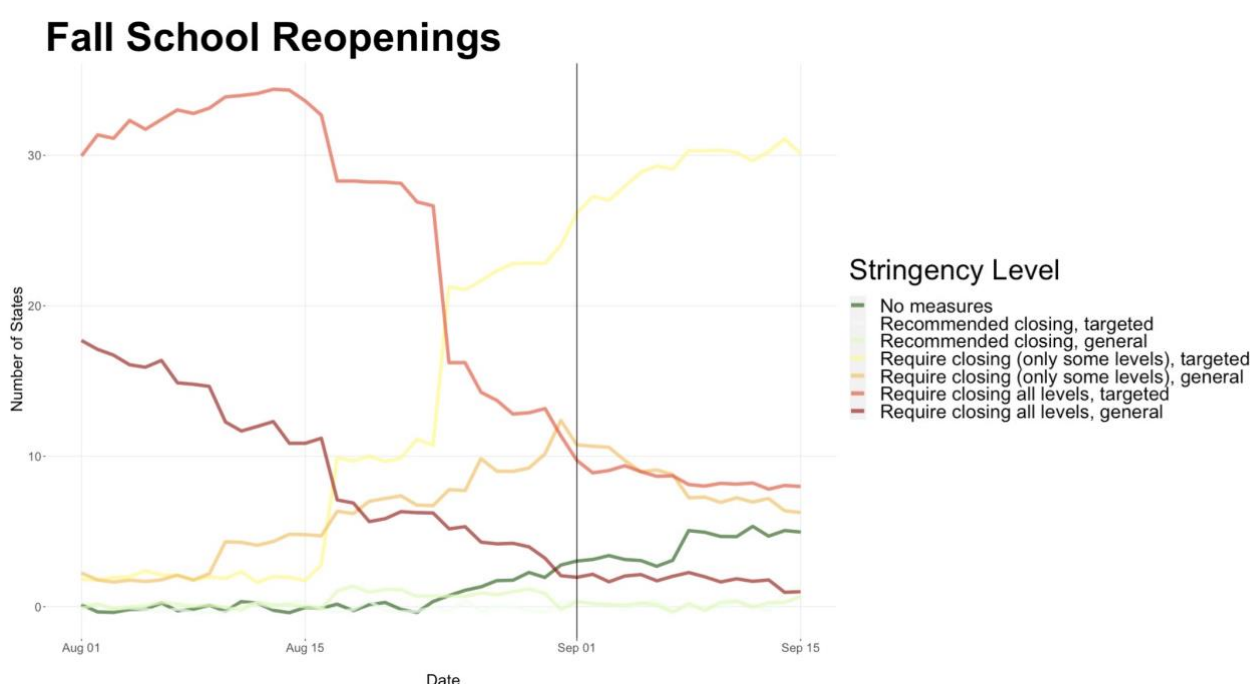


Figure 2. OxCGRT school closure policy levels over time

There continued to be variation within coded levels, with some states coding at similar levels nonetheless varying significantly in their methods and extent of reopening. For example, at the most commonly coded level of targeted, required closing of only some levels, some states such as Oklahoma have been reported by OxCGRT and external databases such as that of Education Week as having significant quantities of in-person courses among the largest K-12 school districts, while others such as Oregon are dominantly remote instruction only [9].

## The Northeast and Midwest join reopening rush, K-12 leading the way

Of the 10 states that lessened stringency in school closure policies, September 1 through 15 saw relatively more reductions among Northeastern (4) and Midwestern states (3), likely because these regions have more regularly scheduled K-12 reopenings following Labor Day in September. The

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## Indicator report - School closures (US)

majority of states with lessened stringency saw K-12 reopenings, with universities more likely to have already begun in-person instruction in August.

### Fall School Reopenings by State

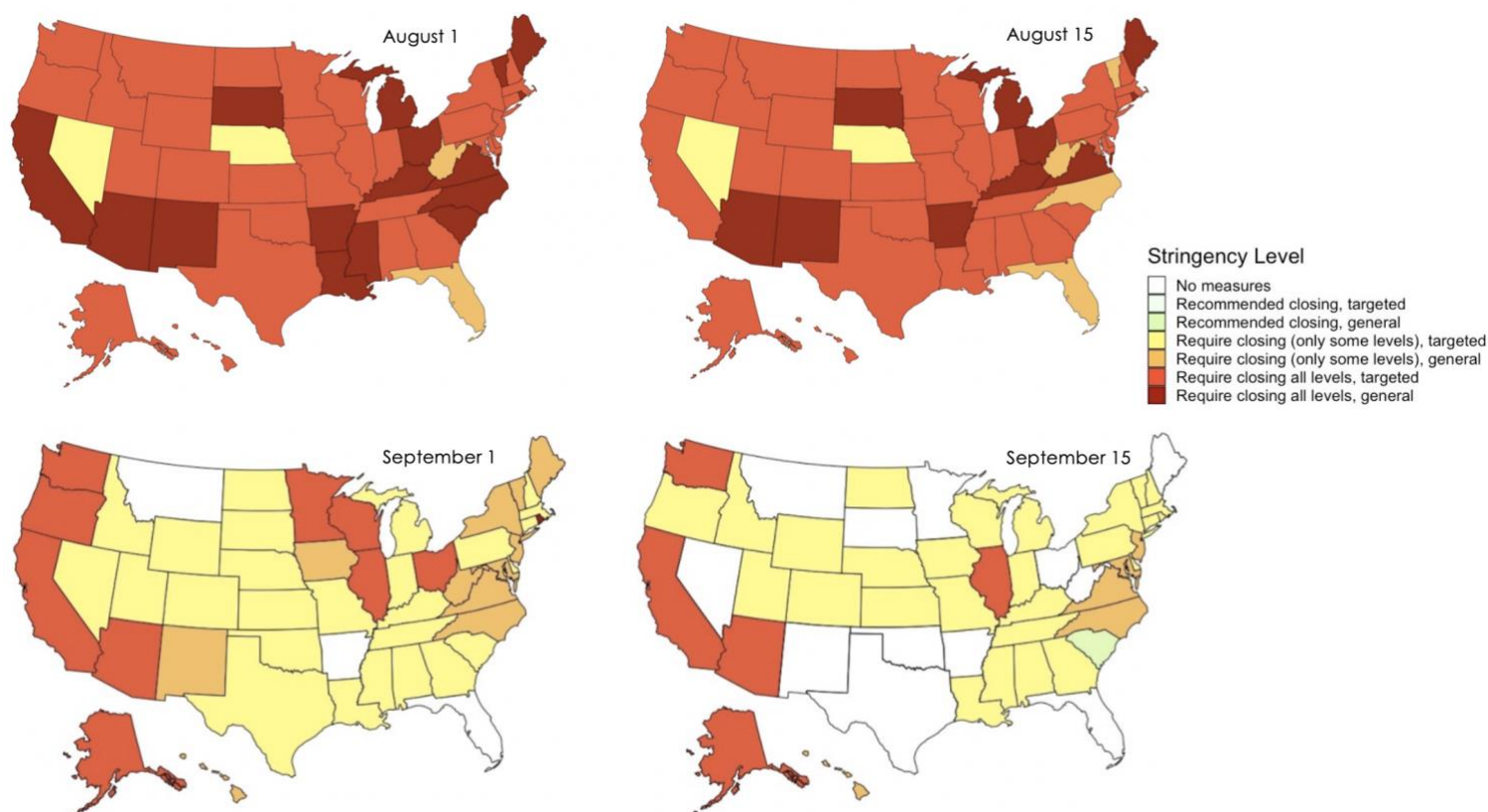


Figure 3. August 1, August 15, September 1, and September 15 OxCGRT school closure policy levels

### Decreasing state involvement, but more K-12 oversight than universities

Almost all states experienced a continuity in university re-openings in September, with no active state policies specifically requiring university closures (though a few states such as Massachusetts, have introduced state guidelines and protocols for university reopenings). K-12 school reopenings have continued to display more state-level planning, with states commonly offering reopening guidance such as phased reopening plans or public health scenarios in which different learning models are most appropriate. These protocols have guided returns to online-only learning in states like New Hampshire as districts respond to a rising number of COVID-19 cases among students. While most states left final reopening decisions to localities, some states did have stricter, centralised requirements, described below.



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Reopening framework	Description	Examples
Mandatory state order	States have ordered that in-person instruction for districts is not allowed before a certain date or pending further orders  OR  states have ordered that in-person instruction for districts is required or otherwise compelled reopenings.	<u>New Mexico</u> The governor has prohibited in-person classes through September 8 [10].  <u>Texas</u> The governor stated local officials cannot prevent schools from reopening, with the Texas Attorney General previously stating that districts who do not reopen within 8 weeks (and do not receive a waiver) may lose funding [11, 12].
State approvals required	State governments provide centralized mandatory criteria for reopenings, or schools must otherwise apply to the state to gain reopening approval.	<u>California</u> Districts can reopen only once their counties meet state public health metrics and remain off of a central 'watchlist' [13].  <u>Rhode Island</u> Districts can reopen only once their counties meet state public health metrics [14].
Education agency guidance	The relevant state education agency/department approves or denies district reopening plans	<u>New Jersey</u> Districts can open for in-person teaching if they fulfil the Department of Education's reopening guidelines. If they do not meet them, schools can request to start the year with remote learning and lay out plans for how they plan to meet the guidelines as the school year progresses [15].
Local School Districts	Individual school districts are independently deciding whether or not to reopen schools, if they follow outlined health measures or meet specific criteria.	<u>Alaska</u> The Commissioner of the Department of Education and Early Development stated that school opening decisions will be made locally and compares this situation to how snow days are decided upon [16].  <u>New Hampshire</u> The Department of Education issued guidelines for school reopening, but the decision is left to individual school districts [17]

Table 1. K-12 reopening governance models

## Continued reopening adaptations: masks, testing, distancing, and more

While OxCGRT does not systematically track school-specific policies, data collectors recorded a variety of adaptations used across K-12 and university reopenings, with some of the most common reported Table 2, including new adaptations identified in September.

Public Health Measures	Academic Year Scheduling	Online/In-Person Choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mandatory face coverings</li> <li>Social distancing measures (staggered)</li> </ul>	K-12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moving up school start dates to allow for phased reopening</li> <li>Delay of in-person school start dates (though states may limit deferrals)</li> </ul>	K-12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents offered choice of in-person or online models</li> </ul>

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<p>schedules, desk spacing, cohorts)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symptom screenings (temperature checks, visual checks)</li> <li>• Enhanced sanitation</li> <li>• Contact tracing (check-in apps, sign-in sheets)</li> </ul>	<p>University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving up school start dates to allow for an end of in-person teaching after Thanksgiving, at which point students will remain home through winter break.</li> <li>• Delay of school start dates (or starting online)</li> <li>• Movement to online following case spikes</li> <li>• Quarantine of off-campus student groups (ex: Greek life houses)</li> </ul>	<p>University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Option to take all online classes (students)</li> <li>• Option to teach all online classes (professors)</li> <li>• Enhanced/expanded online course options (percentage of online offerings as a subset of total offerings varies by university)</li> </ul>
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Table 2. Common reopening adaptations

### Additional K-12 Adaptations

At-risk and vulnerable students were a particular concern of K-12 school reopening policies. In-person learning was commonly first opened to special needs students, even where the rest of the district would be learning primarily online. School districts and states also included provisions for technology access, such as California and Kentucky's plans to provide internet hotspots and procure and distribute iPads and Chromebooks, respectively.

### Additional University Adaptations

Universities' unique position as residential institutions added additional considerations to reopening policies. In addition to previously-described measures, universities allowed for single-occupancy dorm rooms, staggered meal timings in cafeterias, closed shared facilities (water fountains, gyms, etc), and most non-residential buildings off-limits. Testing and contact tracing protocols are common among universities, including surveillance and preemptive testing, mandatory questionnaires, as well as dedicating dorm space for quarantines. These measures also hold importance to the college towns and countries surrounding universities with low non-student populations and Covid-19 case counts dependent on student activities outside of campus.

### Notable reopening examples

Nationwide, a number of school districts and universities have started in-person classes for the new academic year, with several gaining significant media interest.

- **Virginia Tech (Higher Ed)** | Despite an initial surge in cases following the move-in, Virginia Tech has been publicly praised by White House Coronavirus Response coordinator Dr. Birx for its successful testing site, as well as the successful opening of its campus amid the pandemic, with approximately 7% of courses held in-person [18]. Virginia Tech is doing their own testing, and they have also started testing campus wastewater for COVID-19 to be able to detect the virus more rapidly [19, 20]. The New River Health District reported a spike of cases among ages 18-23 after student arrivals, though case counts have since

decreased and health officials reported minimal spillover into the community surrounding campus [21, 22].

- **University of Illinois (Higher Ed)** | On September 2, the University of Illinois asked students to reduce their in-person activities for two weeks, following a spike of cases. This restriction led daily cases to drop again and restrictions have again been eased [23, 24]. The campus required students to be tested before rejoining campus, and have continued twice a week testing to access campus facilities [25].
- **University of Alabama (Higher Ed)** | Since starting classes on August 19, the University of Alabama has reported more than 1000 positive COVID-19 cases. This is despite the University's comprehensive testing program, one of the countries' earliest and most ambitious. The University started randomized sentinel testing of students, staff and faculty members on September 8 [26, 27].
- **James Madison University (Higher Ed)** | On September 1, James Madison University (Virginia) moved all teaching online after a spike in COVID-19 cases, with more than 500 students testing positive. The university is adding additional public health precautions including introduction of surveillance testing and cancelling fall break to reduce student travel, and plans to resume in-person teaching on October 5 [28, 29, 30]. Testing was not a requirement of students reentering campus.
- **New York City public schools (K-12)** | Schools in New York City are set to reopen starting September 21, for part in-person, part remote teaching, after a ten-day delay. Pre-K classes and students with advanced special needs are first to return, with elementary, middle, and high school students set to start school in the following two weeks. New York City was thus the only major school district in the US to welcome students back to school [31, 32].
- **K-12 Case Tracking** | A school reopening [tracker](#) run by the National Education Association (NEA) allows educators to self-report data on confirmed cases, in K-12 and university school environments [33]. On September 21, The New York Times also released the results of their [survey](#) of US school districts, detailing processes of school reopenings and reclosures, with preliminary data indicating that school-spreading clusters have occurred [34]. However, district-level reporting on school-related Covid-19 outbreaks is uneven throughout the country, making risk estimates and comparisons between states difficult

## Selected State Summaries

A summary of reopening policies for selected states is presented below. We focus on:

- The 5 states with highest total case counts from September 1 to 15
- The 5 states with the highest ratio of cases to population from September 1 to 15
- Two of the most and least stringent states in terms of OxCGRT school closure policies

The above categories overlapped among states, resulting in 12 total selected for summary.

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## Indicator report - School closures (US)

State	State context	K-12 openings	University reopenings	CHI <sup>1</sup>	Cases <sup>2</sup>
Arkansas	One of least stringent states in September school reopenings, one of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, an August 5 order by the state Education Secretary required schools to open 5 days a week for part-time or full-time in-person instruction starting from August 24 [13].	Yes, despite outbreaks in colleges and universities, major public universities remain open to at least some in-person instruction (University of Arkansas has a blended model).	44.70, 44.70	71,497
California	One of highest total case count, one of most stringent states in September school reopenings	Some. A state ordered regional closure is in effect; in-person instruction may only resume if the county remains off the state watchlist for 2 weeks.	Some. Limited campuses reopening with in-person classes though most of the California State University system remains remote (UC Berkeley, UCLA, USC offering online classes for most courses).	63.26, 63.26	768,204
Florida	One of highest total case counts, one of least stringent states in September school reopenings	Full-in person learning required following a state reopening order in early-August. State order blocked by Florida judge after teachers filed a lawsuit. However, with a steep decline in cases major cities' stick to plans of phased reopenings (including Miami-Dade) and initiate online classes [35].	Yes, major public universities reopened to at least some in-person instruction (University of Miami, Florida State University, University of Florida).	45.83, 45.83	668,846
Georgia	One of highest total case counts, one of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, more districts have started reopening, adopting a range of instruction models. Many large districts began online. However, schools in Fulton (the most populous county) saw teachers protesting against rushed timelines for reopening.	Yes, major public universities reopened to at least some in-person instruction (University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia State University). University of Georgia saw major fluctuations in case counts among students, over the first 2 weeks of September.	51.52, 51.52	296,994
Iowa	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Governor Reynolds mandated that students receive at least half their classes inside classrooms. Schools can, however, request to teach remotely if COVID infections pass a certain threshold. Schools are defying the	No new reopenings. Three major universities (University of Iowa, Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa) opened in August.	30.30, 28.79	75,721

<sup>1</sup> Values as of September 1 and September 15 in OxCGRT database. CHI calculation described in Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Cases as of September 15 in OxCGRT database as reported by Johns Hopkins University.



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		governor's order, however [36].			
Illinois	One of highest total case counts, one of most stringent states in September school reopenings	Some. Schools in some districts reopened in late-August. Public schools in Chicago (high case count area) are entirely online.	Yes, large public universities reopened to a blend of in-person, and online instruction. Northwestern remains open to limited in-person instruction. At University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign students are urged to restrict in-person activities after an upward trend in case counts was observed.	51.89, 51.89	266,295
Louisiana	Experienced early community spread	Yes, school districts resume operations under a range of instruction models in line with the state's phased guidance. (East Baton Rouge schools began online and transitioned to a hybrid model mid-September).	Yes, the largest public universities reopened to at least some in-person instruction in August. In mid-July there was a meeting with Trump administration officials in which Louisiana college and university leadership were encouraged to reopen.	51.52, 51.52	158,318
Missouri	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, the department of Education has released guidance for schools to decide whether to re-open.	Universities across Missouri remain open. On September 15 it was reported that two university students were expelled for knowingly violating health and safety measures [37].	46.59, 46.59	106,637
North Dakota	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, schools can reopen as long as they meet health guidelines.	Yes, many universities opened in August for at least some in-person teaching (University of North Dakota, North Dakota State University have implemented hybrid teaching).	40.91, 37.12	16,064
New York	Experienced early community spread	Some. Schools have the go ahead from the state. K-12 reopenings started in September. (Syracuse, Brentwood Free reopened on September 1; NYC public schools pushed date further back to September 29, shifting to a phased reopening schedule) [38].	Yes, although Governor Cuomo set a closure threshold on Aug. 27—universities will return to remote learning if more than 100 cases are positive, or if the outbreak is more than 5% of the population. A campus of the State University (SUNY Oneonta) shut down after more than 670 students became infected [39].	69.70, 68.18	445,714
South Dakota	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, a majority of schools reopened in mid- to late-August, with some districts delaying reopening to early September.	Many universities are offering in-person classes, while others are offering a mix of in-person and remote classes. Re-closures have not yet been announced despite cases on the rise.	24.24, 19.70	16,994
Texas	One of highest total case counts	Yes, though the largest school districts (Austin,	Yes, most public universities reopened for at least some in-	51.54, 51.54	692,753

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		Dallas, Houston) push back reopening dates. Austin and Houston plan reopenings for in-person learning in October.	person instruction. In August, the New York Times reported that Texas had the most university Covid-19 cases in a single state. With cases starting to drop, UT-Austin operates with a hybrid model limited at a capacity of 40%. At UT-Rio Grande Valley, a South Texas hotspot, only 15% of classes are in-person or hybrid [40, 41].		
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Table 3. Selected state examples of September 1-15 reopenings with OxCGRT closure and containment index and case values.

### Universities emerging as focus of school reopening concerns

University campuses have emerged as potential COVID-19 hotspots, with university outbreaks occurring even in states where overall policy stringency is high such as in New York [42, 43]. Part of this trend for university outbreaks can be explained by the fact that universities reopened for in-person teaching much earlier than K-12, thus allowing more time for the virus to spread until this point. Additionally, universities house large numbers of students who both live and socialise on campus which makes social-distancing more difficult.

High rates of COVID-19 infections on university campuses is also related to community infection rates. Students interact with the local communities, be it through contact to their homes nearby, through socialising in bars, or through contact with businesses. According to a New York Times review of 203 counties in which at least 10 percent of the population is composed of university students, 50 percent had their worst COVID-19 outbreaks since 1 August, and 50 percent of those are thought to be experiencing a peak now. Despite the high number of infections, deaths have not been on the rise in college communities, further suggesting that it is younger people who are getting infected, as they are less likely to experience life-threatening illness [44].

### School reopenings show further fragmentation of US COVID-19 response

The divide between federal, state, and local responses continued to be a contentious issue into September. The CDC faces criticism for its unclear, often-changing guidance on school openings, amid reports of top officials in the Department of Health and Human Services and the White House coronavirus taskforce bypassing the Centers' scientific editorial protocols to directly issue policies at odds with "the CDC's usual neutral and scientific tone" [45].

On September 15, the CDC for the first time released precise indicators for policy makers to use in determining when to reopen K-12 schools for in-person instruction, in the form of a color-coded system based on indicators such as number of community infections and a school's ability to implement mitigation strategies [46]. This guidance comes weeks after schools began to open

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around the country. In the previous absence of CDC guidance, some states, such as New Mexico and California, had issued their own threshold recommendations for school districts. Many others leave the decision-making authority entirely to the districts. The Center for Reinventing Public Education found that 23 states and DC “provide no clear public health criteria to guide reopening decisions” [47]. What effect these new guidelines will have remains to be seen.

The lack of clear guidance has manifested lawsuits between school districts and state governments [48]. In Iowa, two separate judges ruled in favor of the state requirement that at least 50% of classes be held in-person, while there is an on-going battle in Florida over Governor DeSantis' executive order that all schools must offer in-person instruction five days a week.

## Appendix

### About OxCGRT

The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provides a systematic measure across governments and across time to understand how government responses have evolved over the full period of the disease's spread. In addition to covering around 180 countries and Brazilian states and capital cities, as of August 6 OxCGRT includes data for the 50 US states, as well as the District of Columbia and the US Virgin Islands from January 1, 2020 to the present. The project tracks governments' policies and interventions across a standardized series of indicators and creates a suite of composite indices to measure the extent of these responses. Data is collected and updated in real time by a team of over one hundred Oxford students, alumni, staff, as well as external collaborators. More than 50 trained volunteers have contributed to the collection and review of US data.

US state data are presented in OxCGRT outputs in two main modes 1) data with imputed values from the national level to reflect all policies affecting a jurisdiction, and 2) data representing only the state government level and below. The latter, non-imputed OxCGRT data was the focus of this analysis to better highlight differences between US states and territories. This data is continually updated on the OxCGRT USA Covid Policy GitHub. Data collection is ongoing and provisional.

### About the School Closure indicator

US state data is collected in line with the OxCGRT Codebook to ensure standardization across national and subnational entities. School closures (indicator C1) are coded across four ordinal levels with the option of a targeted/general binary flag. A general flag refers to an additional halfpoint value in calculations (3T=3, 3G=3.5) For the purposes of this brief, listed below are each code and example scenarios warranting their application in US subnational data collection.

**3G:** State order closing K-12 and university levels OR state order + indirect university closures (ex: gatherings) OR state recommendation with specific dates for closing K-12 + indirect university closures (ex: gatherings)

**3T:** All K-12 and universities are closed in some parts of the state

**2G:** One level is generally fully closed or open across the state.

**2T:** One level is fully closed only in certain areas in the state.

**1G:** Widespread reopenings, but significant public health restrictions imposed by local/state levels that inhibit reopenings

**1T:** Widespread reopenings, but significant public health restrictions imposed by local/state levels that inhibit reopenings

**0:** Widespread in-person teaching across all levels

For consistency, volunteers' coding for the OxCGRT C1 indicator focuses on public school districts and public four-year residential university systems as a baseline, though additional school types may be discussed in coding notes. This choice was made because US students are more likely to

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attend public than private educational institutions, and because state oversight extends to these educational levels. Public four-year universities are particularly relevant to reflecting impacts of less stringent US school closure policies, as the Chronicle of Higher Education reports that these institutions are more likely to allow in-person instruction [29]

## About the Containment and Health Index

OxCGRT's containment and health index (CHI), shows how many, and how forceful the measures to contain the virus and protect citizen health are. This combines 'lockdown' restrictions (including school closures), with health measures such as testing policy and contact tracing.

## September 1-15 reopening summary table

Level	September 1	September 15
No policy	3	5
1T	0	1
1G	0	1
2T	26	30
2G	11	6
3T	10	8
3G	2	1
Total	52	52



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