

The Board of Education was unable to deliver a plan

On June 9, 2020, when Superintendent Mathews asked the Board of Education to approve his request to hire an education consulting group, he was clear that he did not believe that SFUSD was well positioned to address the complexity and severity of the challenges presented by Covid. The Board ultimately rejected the request for outside assistance because they believed the task could be handled in-house.

Our review of meetings from June 9 until present reveal that our Board of Education came up well short of their duty to the families and children of San Francisco to develop and execute a comprehensive plan. Their failure is a huge factor in why San Francisco's children are still not in classrooms. We can't help but conclude that the Board should have listened to Board member Rachel Norton who pointed out "we have kind of sucked at doing this in the past."

The task set before the Board was a monumental one. It required planning across many departments, creating multiple contingency plans, and maintaining communication with a complicated array of stakeholders, all while adjusting to constantly shifting health and safety guidelines. We do not underestimate the difficulty of this task. However, the challenge does not forgive their shortcomings, which include:

1. Lack of urgency

One of the most notable things is simply the lack of focus on preparing for the day when students could safely return to schools. This is evidenced in several ways:

- The summer of 2020 was a critical time to ramp up planning and prepare for the new school year. The Board did not present a [Fall Learning Plan](#) until the [July 28th](#) Board Meeting. What they presented was vague and lacked details such as prioritization, level of effort, and resources required.
- Between June 9, 2020 until March 16, 2021, the Board conducted more than 80 meetings. In these, reopening has been an official agenda item only 20 times.
- When reopening did make the agenda, it was most often found near the end of schedule, listed as item H or I.
- Updates were often brief and/or insubstantial. A "Distance Learning Update" at the October 8 meeting was essentially just two slides, soliciting feedback from SFUSD families and staff.
- The October 20 meeting ran almost 9 hours. The reopening discussion began somewhere around the 7 hour mark. This was not unusual.

2. Lack of Robust Project Management

Dr. Matthews specifically requested Project Management assistance. Project Management, at a minimum, requires an initiation, a plan, execution, and accountability. One expects to see milestones, status updates, engagement of stakeholders, and performance metrics. Reviewing the planning documents through this lens reveals some gaping holes. Here are a few:

- The July 28 [Fall Learning Plan](#) was the Board's first attempt to offer a roadmap for what lies ahead. It summarized results of summer town halls, outlined CDC guidelines, and highlighted some potential challenges. Upon closer inspection, however, this document was heavy on rhetoric and light on substance. While it referred optimistically to the possibility to "explore the use of outdoor spaces" and pointed out the need to "Build out school sites to comply with COVID-19 health and safety guidance," the actual discussion of Operations and Logistics represented approximately 7 pages of the 50 page document. *No specific goals or milestones were identified, nor were dates assigned, nor was it even clear whether they were talking about all of SFUSD or just certain grades.*
- On September 30, the Board's Committee on Status of Reopening School delivered a 5-slide [presentation](#), with two slides of reopening-related information describing their in-person learning logistics decision tree and proposed hybrid learning partnerships protocol. The presentation included *no milestones, deliverables, or concrete objectives.*
- It took until October 7th for the district to issue their [first request for proposals](#) to identify providers who could oversee regular COVID testing.
- It took until [November 17](#) for the Board to assign a target opening date for the reopening process. [In a special resolution, the Board pointed to data from New York's low transmission rates, emphasized the importance of in-person learning, and "directs and authorizes the Superintendent to begin reopening in-person instruction" for "preschool students, elementary grade students with moderate to severe disabilities, and all other students in grades TK-1 including students in general education no later than January 25, 2021."]
- Throughout the fall and winter, facilities updates were minimal. At the [December 3rd](#) meeting the Buildings, Grounds, and Services Committee provided some information, but not updates for any classrooms for grades 3-12. As of February 3rd, only one site assessment had been completed. As of March 18th that number increased to 6 out of 128.
- Communication with stakeholders didn't go smoothly. The October 20th meeting featured many irate comments seeking more information. At the December 8th meeting, the Board's own [Parent Advisory Council report](#) detailed this frustration, saying "The District needs to do better in communicating with and supporting Principals, Teachers, and Families during this process."

3. Blind Spots

We want to acknowledge, again, that this task was a daunting one. And ultimately, some areas were addressed adequately. Unfortunately, a successful school reopening plan is contingent upon all areas being adequately addressed. The whole is only as strong as the weakest link. The school reopening process had several areas that were identified but consistently under-explored, ignored, or deprioritized. Even school sites that developed comprehensive, implementable plans, and identified funding opportunities were not approved by SFUSD to explore such options even as a pilot.

Outdoor Learning:

From early on, parents and community groups pressed the district on the possibility of outdoor learning. They pointed out San Francisco's favorable climate, relative abundance of outdoor spaces, and—again and again—the urgency of getting kids away from screens and back to engaging with their peers and teachers. Despite this pressure, the potential for outdoor learning never really gained any traction. The closest the committee came was at the December 3rd meeting, which included some bare-bone outdoor classroom parameters, but nothing actionable. There never appeared to be a real attempt to give it serious consideration. Given what research was telling us about the inadequacies of distance learning, especially for our youngest learners, this is a discouraging oversight. As of this writing, there is still no clear process for school sites to utilize outdoor sites in their planning.

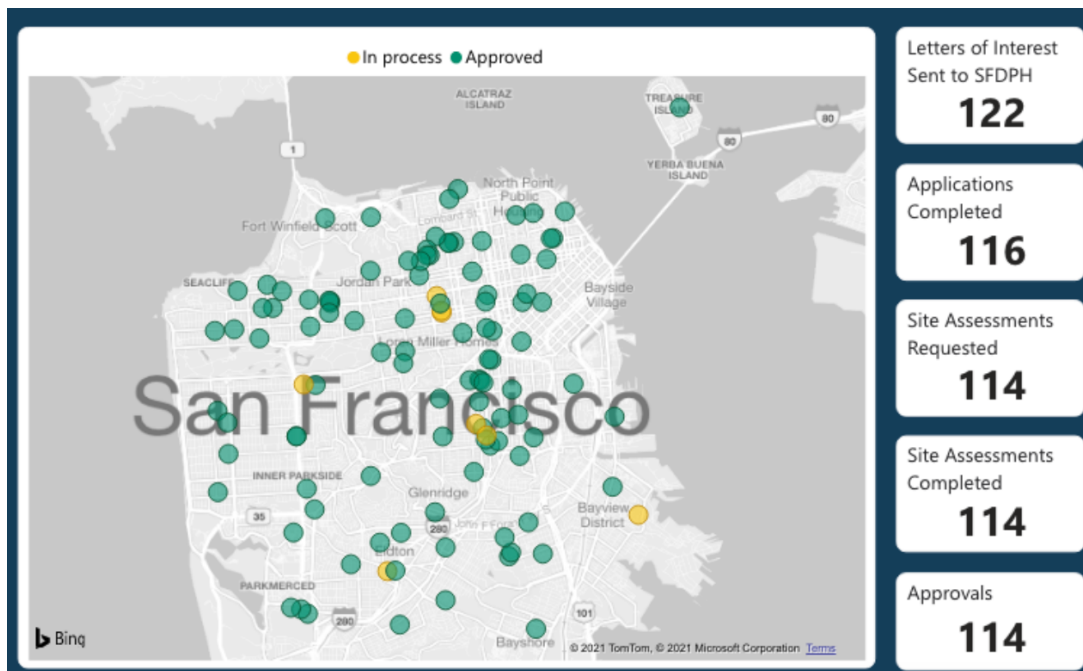
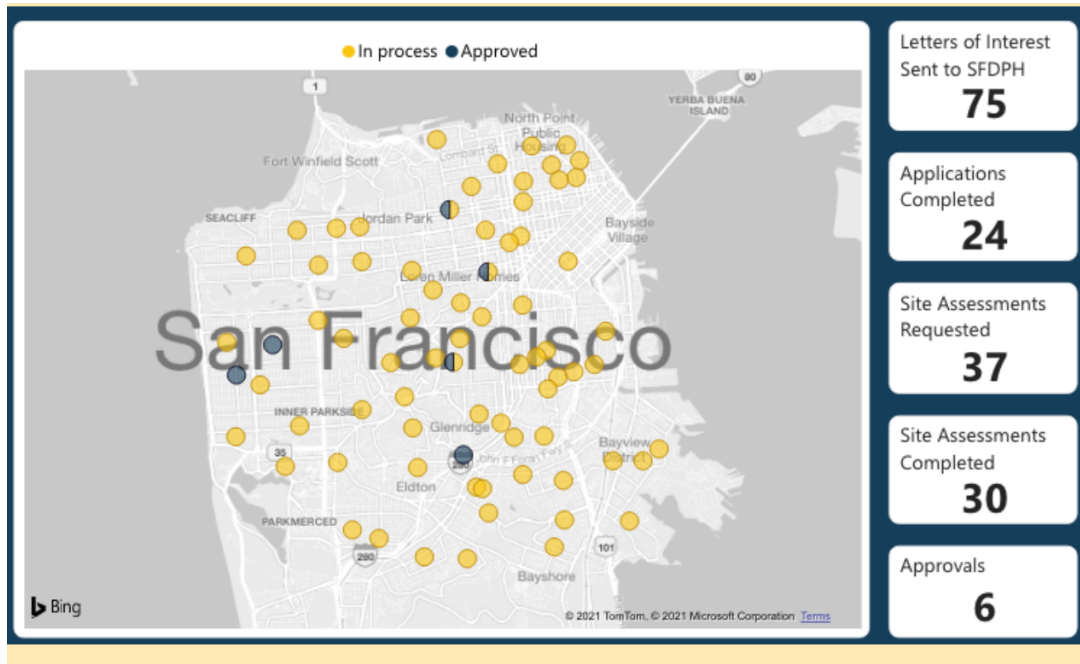
Middle and High School:

Consistently, the Reopening Updates that SFUSD provided focused on our youngest and most vulnerable learners. We completely agree with this prioritization. However, prioritizing some groups shouldn't mean ignoring others. The initial Pre K-1st grade focus expanded in December to include 2nd graders, and then eventually, in the spring, to include all of PK-5. Consistently, however, Middle and High School families have been left in the dark.

This is true as late as the December 8th Meeting, when the Board finally presented a fairly comprehensive "Return Safely Together" report. This report fails to mention Middle or High Schools, beyond a brief recognition that "opening all middle school and high school campuses would require additional custodial support, either through additional employees or in-kind assistance from the City and County. As plans for middle schools and high schools become clearer, we will have more precise estimates of these costs."

Even by the January 26th Meeting, there is no mention made of when these students, representing approximately 40% of the student body, might be able to return to in-person schooling.

Evidence of this blind spot is very clear at the February 23 meeting when newly-elected Commissioner Matt Alexander admitted "I just learned, and this is maybe my naivete in this process, I just learned that the current negotiation around the MOU doesn't even include middle school and high school, and that was rather disturbing to me. That process needs to start immediately."



More discouraging still, the dashboard indicates that Letters of Interest to prepare for opening have only been submitted for 75 of SFUSD's 128 sites.

We close with two other notable facts that we believe further demonstrate the Board's failure to deliver

1. Board seeks to hire a Project Manager

At the November 17, 2020 meeting, the Board's Special resolution included a request for a new position: a Strategic Policy and Project manager to "increase the Board's capacity to strategically plan, prioritize resources, and monitor implementation of Distance Learning, schools reopening and transition back to in-person learning that is responsive to the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and health directives established by the City and County of San Francisco and State of California...the Strategic Project and Policy Manager shall work and report directly to the President of the Board of Education."

2. SF City Attorney sues SFUSD and the Board of Education

On February 3rd, The SF City Attorney's office, in collaboration with Mayor Breed, took the highly unusual step of [suing SFUSD](#) in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan.

The petition stated "SFUSD and its Board of Education have no meaningful plan for how or when in-person instruction will begin for any of SFUSD's students. Other than proclaiming—contrary to the weight of evidence from health experts—that schools cannot be opened safely..."

The petition further stated that "the learning continuity and attendance plan (LCAP) prepared by SFUSD and adopted by the Board is ambiguous empty rhetoric. It states, for example, that SFUSD is 'exploring a variety of innovative ways to implement a hybrid model,' 'modeling options for scheduling,' and 'rethinking time and space.' Essentially, Respondents indicate that the District has a plan to make a plan."

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"We at Families for San Francisco can't say it any better.