

Subject: Written testimony for distance learning

Hello Ms. Fritz,

As an educator and as a mother of 3 children is like to take a moment to explain the difficulties of the past 3 months. My children have great teachers and they did an amazing job teaching online, however, it wasn't the same as face to face teaching. This was especially true for my 6 year old daughter who had a terrible time sustaining attention and focusing long enough to learn a new concept. I saw her go from loving school to really not enjoying it at all. She was not happy or joyous. My 5th grade boys were able to navigate school on their own fairly well, but assignments and projects were long. I was needed to be my Childrens educator while I was trying to work and while my husband tried to work. This can not continue.

My students in whom I provide speech language therapy for, did their best. It was difficult to connect with some of them and when I did it was difficult to hear them correctly. My students with extreme needs such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, struggled and lost so much they had gained throughout the year. They need school for the routine and social aspects it provides.

I'm asking that schools open and remain open. With measures in place we can make it work. Families can not continue to homeschool their kids and work. Mental health suffers as does the relationship of kids and parents.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Susie Berger

June 23, 2020

To Whom it May Concern,

I write this letter as a parent of four school-aged children and an MN educator for 12 years. It is critical that we get our children back in school to learn the way we know will be most beneficial to their social-emotional, physical, and intellectual needs. While we will need to keep our kids safe we also need to avoid an institutionalized-fear driven environment with masks, tape on the floor, and isolation. If and when there is an actual outbreak in a school from COVID that is the time and place for distance learning. There isn't enough evidence that COVID will affect our students to make such drastic and detrimental changes to our children's education.

As parents go back to work, who will watch the kids at home? Who will help them with their digital learning? Have there been issues with the childcare facilities that have remained open this entire time? Many students will be attending a childcare or daycare in place of school still being exposed to many other children. K-8 students (and perhaps even 9-12) are not developmentally ready to successfully obtain information and learn through the digital platform. SO many families are stating they will be pulling their children from the public school system if distance learning, social distancing, and masks are part of the proposed plan for school this fall. What will happen to our schools' budgets when enrollment plummets? Who will cover the cost difference? Will teachers be fired because of the unnecessary choices being made?

Let's think about the parents for a moment. Many parents stepped up to the challenge this past spring. We saw an even larger achievement gap among students. Those students' parents that work full-time, are single parents, lost jobs, or struggle financially were unable to support their child's educational needs. This is not fair to these students or their parents. The stress we added to their home with distance learning was catastrophic for some and led to increases in abuse, neglect, and lack of learning. For myself included, my own children's learning suffered at the expense of my inability to balance performing my job and attempts to educate my students.

A MAJOR difference between last spring and the upcoming fall is the lack of developed relationships. Last spring we had the advantage of having developed strong relationships with our students for 6 ½ months prior to distance learning. This enabled us to know and understand family dynamics and the individual student. We knew how much to push and when to back off. Coming into school this fall with a new "batch" of students without any developed relationships would deem impossible to carry out distance learning with any sort of success. Our number one initiative in our middle

school is relationships. Distance learning does not allow for us to develop the necessary relationships students need for their social and emotional success.

So many parents send their children to school for social interaction, music and physical education, and an education for the “whole” student. We need to proceed with caution. If families pull out now for homeschool, private schools or find some version of online schooling how will we appeal to them in the future to return to our public schools? If there was a time for reform, it is now. Hear the people and listen. As an educator for the past 12 years, I can say wholeheartedly that I love my job. I can also wholeheartedly say that I hated distance learning. It stripped us of everything we love about our jobs-student interaction, being in the classroom, helping kids navigate life skills (communication, friendships, leadership, honesty, integrity, resilience, etc). We teach so much more than math and reading to these kids. We need them in our classrooms and without a fear-driven environment all day and everyday.

Most importantly let’s think about our kids. They need social, emotional, physical and intellectual interactions as a part of their education. The education provided by distance learning was nowhere near the opportunity provided in the brick and mortar setting. We were also at a point in the school year where the majority of grade-level standards had already been addressed. Those few standards that remained were extremely difficult to teach and resulted in little mastery through distance learning. Children need to be with their peers for their social and emotional well being. They also need exposure to the “good” germs or we will be creating an immune deficient generation. Students will not be able to successfully complete school without the allotment of recess, PE, lunch in the lunchroom, or other elective courses. These are essential for the overall well-being and well-rounded education.

It is time to open up our schools and give our children the education they deserve. PLEASE construct your plan with educators help so the parameters that are established are realistic. The CDC guidelines clearly lack an educator’s input and expertise. Thank you for your time and consideration. I would love to provide more input if you are interested or need more information.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Popelka

Resident of Silver Lake, MN

Educator at ISD #466 Dassel Cokato Middle School, 5th Grade

06/24/2020

Dear Distance Learning Hearing Committee Members:

I am a special education teacher in the Chisago Lakes School District. This is my 20th year as an educator. I am writing to implore you to allow us to **return to school in the Fall without restrictions** (i.e. masks, social distances, and maximum capacities).

This spring, distance learning was a struggle for ALL students, but especially so for our special education population who need additional support to make gains in skills. We cannot provide the services needed to adequately address the needs of students with IEPs, nor can we adequately monitor progress of students' goals. Many of our students experienced regression in skills due to the lack of services and supports in the distance learning model.

Some of the things that adversely impacted students during distance learning include the following:

- Isolation from Peers - Children need socialization to thrive and develop appropriate social and communication skills.
- Lack of Nutrition - Many children rely on the school food program for a healthy breakfast and lunch. While districts offered food to families, many families did not take advantage of the program for a variety of reasons, including inability to access the pick up.
- Inequities in Internet and Technology - Not only do some children lack access to internet and technology tools, but they also lack the skills needed to use them independently.
- Lack of Instruction - Work was pushed out with little to no instruction, leading to frustration among students and parents.
- Lack of Content - Material/curriculum covered was substantially reduced from what students would have received if they had been in school.

Many of our students "checked out" from their education during distance learning. The reasons are many and include the following:

- Lack of support at home
- Lack of understanding of the technology and content
- Caring for siblings
- Abuse
- Mental health needs
- Chemical use

If we return to school with restrictions, it will be detrimental to the students and staff.

- Students with sensory issues will not be able to wear masks. If staff try to enforce mask wearing, it could lead to physical behaviors that impact the safety of staff and other students.
- Masks are only effective if kept on and not touched. This is not a realistic expectation for children in school. Masks will be touched, adjusted, and removed frequently, which will completely undermine the point of wearing them.
- Students need PE, recess, and lunch with their peers. These are times to socialize, get out energy in a positive manner, and is imperative to physical and mental well-being.
- Logistically, so much educational time will be lost if we need to implement temperature taking measures, increase bus routes, staggering arrival and dismissal times, hand washing routines, etc.

Throughout the time of distance learning, children continued to attend daycare - both residential and non-residential, as well as school programs. The children did not wear masks or socially distance. Yet, we have not seen an abundance of COVID cases from these settings. Why treat schools differently?

Where we have seen an abundance of COVID cases is in elder care facilities. This is where 81% of all COVID deaths have occurred. In fact, facilities were required to take back COVID patients when released from the hospital, even when still contagious. We need to focus our efforts on protecting the elderly, who are dying, not our children.

Please look at the science and follow it! We do not need to continue to keep schools closed.

ALL students suffered during distance learning and we, as a society, cannot afford to continue allow our students to suffer further! If we do, we will pay for the social, emotional, mental, and financial toll it has on our children and families for years, even decades, to come. Please do not allow fear to outweigh common sense and science. Please allow us to return to school without restrictions!

Respectfully,  
Holly Erickson

I am an Education Assistant with Robbinsdale Area School District 281. I worked with students during distance learning via google meet and also supported material distribution via school bus routes for students who needed printed materials due to lack of internet access or other obstacles which prevented them from utilizing the internet to access course materials.

My main responsibilities involved working with and supporting students who receive special education services related to emotional and behavioral disabilities. I also serve as the union representative in my building for non-licensed staff (education assistants).

My experiences were both positive and negative, as was expected during this time. I do want to make it known that from my perspective, the population of students I worked with (Center based special education, emotional and behavioral disabilities) did so much better than I expected. These students are often the most difficult to motivate while onsite in a typical classroom setting. There are many days during the school year that we (myself and the other Education Assistants in our program) spend much of the day redirecting behaviors and following students around the hallways trying to convince them to go back to class.

There were several days during distance learning that the majority of my time was spent making phone calls and trying to connect with students because they didn't show up for a google meet or because they didn't submit an assignment. However, the times when I was able to connect and get a student onto a google meeting... I found that they were much more cooperative and willing to complete their work with me than they had been while in the classroom setting.

I think the covid shut down was an unfortunate event, but I also think there are many things to be learned from it. I believe there is a silver lining where some of our SPED/EBD students are concerned and I think there are many doors that may have been opened as a result of this experience. I think it is worth looking into, particularly as far as distrusted learning is concerned.

Many of the students I work with are at a much higher risk for behavioral consequences such as suspensions ( in and out of school) do to behavioral incidents and safety concerns while attending school onsite. This puts them at a disadvantage because of the isolation from peers and missed education opportunities they endure as a result of being suspended or separated from their peers. Because of this, staff members often are reluctant to enforce school wide discipline policies such as suspensions where these students are involved. I feel that this often puts other students at risk ( such as when a violent behavior occurs and the students involved are not suspended and are in contact with one another the very next day without the opportunity for a restorative conversation beforehand).

I think the success that some of these students have shown during distance learning proves that we can use virtual classrooms as a tool going forward. Perhaps a restorative practices program could be implemented using google meets or zoom, where the students could be in separate rooms but could still meet face to face with a mediator present (the meeting facilitator, possibly). This could increase the success of restorative practices in schools and could expedite the process of getting these kids back into the classroom in a safe manner. I'm not sure who I should speak to about these ideas, but I definitely think they are worth someone's time and attention. If this is not the correct venue, could you please direct my Email to the appropriate party?

Thanks much,

Vanessa Murray

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Vanessa Murray  
Certified Trauma Practitioner  
-Education Assistant  
(CTP-E, EA)

As a teacher and parent I'm writing to express my concerns about the coming school year. I feel very strongly that kids need to return to school, despite some small risk. My son has severe food allergies and we have assumed this risk as part of his daily life, sending him to school with precautions, because we value the social and emotional benefits school brings. We could have chosen to homeschool, but the depth of learning would not have been the same. Here are my main reasons for supporting a full return to school:

-Mental health, especially for middle schoolers and teens who already face higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. The loss of social interaction and milestone moments is hitting us all, and we need a reason to live.

-Physical health...Having spent full days working remotely, sitting in a chair for hours isn't good for anyone.

-Lack of motivation in distance learning (How long will it take students to unlearn this apathy towards excellence?)

-Depth of knowledge – students are not thinking or learning as deeply as they do in the classroom, ideas are not being shared. They aren't spending time with those who may challenge their perspectives or expose them to new ideas.

-Too much unstructured time – I think we're seeing the results of this already, and it's sure to be worse when kids are left home alone and parents are back at work.

I will always teach to the best of my ability, but I know I am not at all excited about the idea of distance learning, nor are my students or children excited to about the prospect. An absence of enthusiasm is a guarantee of minimal effort and basement level outcome. I will happily wear a shield or mask if required of teachers and take any other steps needed to keep the classroom/building safe.

Teachers and students who are most at risk can be kept safe by having those teachers do remote learning with those students while the rest of us get back to the building. One teacher could have several students, regardless of their home school, in a "class." I am an intervention teacher but I would absolutely step into a classroom role if needed.

Jessica Fu  
Anoka Hennepin Schools