

To: Senate and House Committees on Education
From: Nancy Willard, Embrace Civility, <http://embracecivility.org> and <http://bepositivelypowerful.com>
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Re: School Reopening and Emotional Concerns of Students and School Staff
Date: January 22, 2021

Welcome to 2021. Thank you for your service.

I have been a member of a Facebook group, Oregon for a Safe Return to Campus since August. The thoughts I am expressing are based on my assessment of the harmful impact of state decision-making. This assessment is informed by my work in trauma informed practices and bullying.

Governor Brown's [misguided efforts](#) to open schools to in-person learning is placing the ongoing effectiveness of Oregon's schools at high risk.

The Governor has encouraged schools to shift to in-person instruction at the same time infections are exploding. Every Oregon educator wants to return to school. Only when it is safe for them, their families, their students, the families of their students, and their communities.

Research has documented that when transmission rates are low, it is relatively safe to hold schools in-person. But [not](#) when the transmission rate is high as it is now. The new, more [vigorous variant](#) now in Oregon. The concern is not only death; evidence of [long lasting harm](#) from this virus is mounting.

[Recent data](#) demonstrates that teachers have higher infection rates than the general public. It is not known whether the vaccine will [protect against transmission](#). Even if school staff are vaccinated, many live with someone at high risk of serious illness — who, under the Governor's plan, will not be vaccinated.

[One third of children](#) who are infected do not show symptoms. [Hospitalizations](#) of children are dramatically increasing. In states which pushed students to be in school, the rates have exploded. Utah showed a 5,067% increase and Arizona a 4000% increase. Both states have pushed in-person schooling.

Students can transmit the virus to other students while at school. Students infected at [schools](#) do spread the virus to family members. A [recent study](#) in Canada has shown that in person instruction is a leading contributor to the transmission of the virus to others in the community.

Oregon leaders [claim](#) that they are seeing low infection rates in schools. Lack of evidence of transmission does not mean lack of transmission. Pediatricians have had [limited access](#) to tests and routinely deny tests unless there has been a clear documented exposure. Parents may refuse to test their child. Despite very few schools being open in Oregon, [162 students and 273 staff](#) who were in school have tested positive.

Any child who has a family member at higher risk will place that family member at significant risk if they return to school. Families of color and those living in expanded family arrangements are at high risk, as are the many grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Children are reportedly [apologizing](#) to their dying family members for bringing home the virus that is killing them.

I have a very significant concern about the messaging from state leaders. They are telling parents that there are limited risks of transmission if their children return to school. Further, they are placing significant pressure on students who face greater challenges, including students of color who live in families that are at a much higher risk. My concern is that the combination will result in more families being placed at higher risk.

Students at higher risk and those from families that are at higher risk absolutely should not return to in-school instruction.

The Governor claimed [youth suicide](#) has increased. The [rate of suicide in Oregon](#) has not increased during the pandemic. National evidence demonstrates the risk of suicide significantly [increases](#) when students return to school.

The Governor indicated that schools must open to support the [emotional well-being of students and academic achievement](#). Opening schools under the current circumstances will not accomplish this.

[Students at school](#) will be required to stay in their 35 square foot “bubble.” Student socializing will be dangerous. Student disruptive behavior will likely increase and be much more dangerous.

[Infections](#) will be inevitable at school. Any morning, parents could be told their child is in quarantine—then spend the next 10 days worrying whether their child was exposed and if their child exposed them. When young people do get sick, they are required to stay in [self-isolation](#) in a specific “sick room,” away from other family members.

During remote instruction, students have 4 days of face to face instruction, with the ability to privately reach out for assistance. When they return to school, students will only come 2 days a week. Teachers will lecture from the front of the room, wearing a mask, with no ability to provide private assistance. Much time will be spent enforcing the safety protocols.

On the 2 days students are at home they will either be doing independent work or watching a video of the teacher lecturing to the students at school. Students who choose to continue remote instruction will be “excommunicated” from their classes where they have established supportive relationships with their teachers and peers. This abandonment will cause profound trauma.

It is most certainly true that remote instruction has had its challenges. Many of the challenges demonstrated by remote instruction are actually evidence of why Oregon schools have not been succeeding while in-person. It is too often said that students lack motivation, so we need to return them to school.

This points to the underlying concern that Oregon schools are too reliant on extrinsic motivation approaches — rewards for compliant behavior. The compliant behavior that is expected is to pay attention to scripted lessons in accord with the Common Core.

To ensure effective learning requires a focus on intrinsic motivation. Daniel Pink addressed this in his book [Drive](#). To enhance student learning, it is necessary to focus on positive connections with school staff (about a third of Oregon students do not think any staff member really cares about them — OHT data), supporting students in gaining competencies in areas that are of interest to them (authentic learning), and personal control (project based learning).

However, there are many success stories from the many wonderful teachers in Oregon who have been in schools that have allowed and supported their effective offering of remote instruction. I collected comments from Oregon educators and parents on what they were seeing in remote instruction. I provided a document of these comments to the State Board of Education in December.

Two Critical Issues

There are two critical issues that must be addressed. One is the emotional well-being of school staff in those districts that have opened or are planning to open to soon. The second is the emotional well-being of students.

Emotional Well-Being of School Staff

I set up a survey and made a post in the Oregon Safe Return to School group on January 2, I asked both certified and classified school staff to respond to this one question: “Please provide three words (single words) that apply to how you are feeling after Governor Brown’s announcement on December 24 about schools reopening. Within several days, there were over 1,200 responses.

This word cloud displays the top words listed. Anyone who does not think this is a concern, please think again.



As I have become a strong advocate for the educators in this group, some have been contacting me privately. In recent weeks, I have privately counseled several staff members who I had concerns were suicidal. I made sure that they had appropriate supports in place. I counseled one single mom who was having daily panic attacks. Her 6 year old daughter is high risk and her district had denied her request for accommodations. I also counseled one older teacher whose 79 year old mother with dementia lives with her. She also had been denied accommodations to continue what sounded to me like a dynamite career technical remote class. She had decided to quit — leaving the district she had given her all to for 30 years with a profound feeling of betrayal. Also, a classified staff person of color who had been with the district for years and was a strong supporter of students in his role in school safety. He took a leave of absence from his work of reaching out to students who were not well integrated into the remote instruction because he was being required to return to school and this placed his wife at risk.

Publicly, in Oregon Safe Return, many educators (both certified and classified) have reported being harassed publicly by parents and community members for their desires not to place their health and lives at risk, when the alternative of remote instruction is available. Many report frequent crying or panic attacks. Many are taking leaves of absence. Many are resigning.

Even worse, there are multiple reports almost every day from staff in schools that have opened about the failure of staff and leadership to abide by the safety protocols. Students who are sick are not kept in a safe place until their parent can pick them up, they are returned to the classroom. Personal protective gear has not been provided. Ventilation systems are non-functional. Staff who do not wear masks. Schools taking days to provide notice that someone has tested positive. In one case, the staff member who was exposed was not informed and his wife also became infected. In one district, a student who was in school on Wednesday, received a positive test result on Friday, told the school on Monday — and the district decided that he must not have been infectious on Wednesday and so there was no need to tell anyone.

Further, some staff have reported being called on the carpet for having the temerity to complain. Some have filed complaints with Occupational Safety and Health Administration. But OSHA is overwhelmingly backlogged.

The strong perspective in Oregon Safe Return is that based on the manner in which some districts have responded, they are absolutely not a district any highly competent educator would want to work for. I am wondering how these districts think they are going to establish a positive school climate based on trust and respect after this.

Please note that there are some districts that are making very safe decisions — for which their staff are very grateful.

The concerns about the leadership of some districts is also reflected in opinions for the Oregon Department of Education. I am quite aware that Colt Gill has been launching some excellent programs and approaches, especially in areas of equity and student voice. Colt has so damaged his relations with the high quality, progressive educators in this state, I do not know how he will accomplish this.

In August, I provided a document to the state board that was a take off of the Elevating Student Voices document. This is attached. In December, I provided the document on how remote instruction was working. Later in December, Colt decided that perhaps he ought to communicate with teachers. He did create an effective survey that yielded good results — most of which have been ignored. Reports from educators of the so-called “listening sessions” Colt has held have been quite discouraging. He spends his time trying to convince them it is safe to open schools during this time of exploding infections — and does not listen.

It is my opinion that the failure to fully integrate school staff voice into decision-making in this state will place the entire Student Success Act implementation into great jeopardy.

The Well-Being of Students

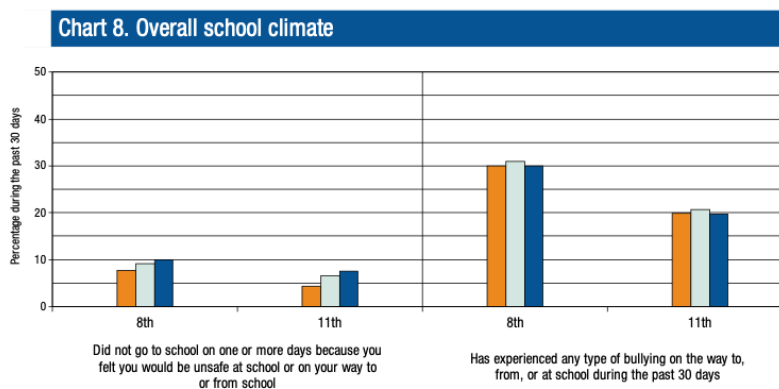
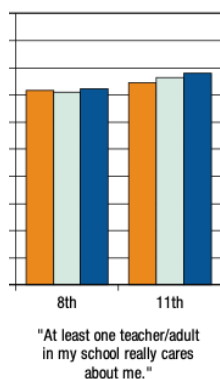
I strongly encourage you to read this article by Rashelle Chase: [The ‘Reopen Schools Now!’ Debate Is Rooted In Racism](#). From, this article:

They (parents pressuring for opening) claim that schools are the safest places for kids, and exploit tragic suicides, even when faced with data that we are facing our deadliest month since the pandemic began. And, ironically, they typically claim that “the data” is what is guiding their decision.

The points made by Rashelle are ones that I am in full accord with. I would draw your attention to this first point:

While distance learning certainly hasn’t been a great experience for all children, it *has* been a refuge for many children who weren’t safe in schools in the first place, children whose needs have long gone unmet.

To back up Rashelle’s point, here is data from the Oregon Healthy Teen Survey, 2019. The first is from the Positive Youth Development questions and the second on school climate (orange — 2015, gray - 2017, blue - 2019).



I spent the last legislative session trying to convince the state legislature to address the concerns in the state bullying prevention approach — and failing.

So I am going to try to tell you something, anticipating the same level of failure.

The huge concerns of student emotional well-being are not now, they are before us. Look closely at many of the comments in the document on student successes in remote learning. Look at the numerous comments from teachers and parents of students who are having surprising success in remote instruction who were not being successful while in school. This includes students who experience anxiety in the school setting, those with attention concerns or who are neurologically diverse, and those who were experiencing bullying, denigration and exclusion.

These students have been experiencing success — some, it appears, for the first time in their schooling. Further, the bullying has gone away.

So what do you think is going to happen next fall, when they return to “school as normal?” But perhaps, not even as it was. They will return to schools where some members of our society think that the efforts to correct our history in a way that allows people to actually understand history through the eyes of BIPOC communities. We should assume a [backlash](#).

The evidence at this time is that there has not been an increase in youth suicides. We certainly also have not experienced school violence.

My concern is that starting next fall, we will see a profound increase in both school violence/disruption and youth suicide. My further concern is that, like my earlier efforts to address bullying, no one will pay attention to what I am suggesting you should be concerned about. But at least I have tried.

I have written two books for young people on resilience and empowerment and have prepared professional development resources for educators on trauma, resilience, and equity in the age of covid. More information is on my [website](#).

