

Dear Senate Committee on Education:

We sit here in mid-January with Portland's schools having been closed for 10 months. We have Seniors at risk of losing their entire Senior year; kindergartners who have never set foot in their schools or met their teachers or peers; many elementary kids with documented educational loss and SEL loss.

As the Oregonian editorial board said recently - everyone who has a qualified opinion on this issue - public health experts, educational experts, pediatricians, mental health experts - they all say schools should be open, particularly in places with low spread like Oregon - we are consistently the 2nd or 3rd lowest in the nation. And our cases have fallen for 6 straight weeks. While there is a ton of data on the safety of schools, I want to highlight a study that came out a few weeks ago. It is a Duke study out of North Carolina schools - primary, middle and high school, 56 districts; 35 with in-person of some kind, 17 open for full study time (Aug 15-Oct 23). Every case associated with the schools were traced. There were ZERO cases of children transmitting to adults. Additionally, where there was school-associated transmission, it was a case or two. No school district in the nation has seen any sort of super spreader event, or large outbreaks of COVID from schools.

I understand the decision to close in the Spring. I understand that schools not posing a risk of spread is counterintuitive. But, we are now making decisions with life long impact on student's lives based on fear - not science. I beg you to make science-based decisions. The students in this state depend on you to make science-based decisions.

The harms of keeping schools closed are dramatic and increasing. As private schools open, and they will, the educational disparities so many public school children already face are going to grow exponentially.

Oregon rightly brings an equity lens to its decisions. With all due respect, this is the greatest equity challenge that this state has ever faced. Those suffering the worst harms of CDL are the students who can least afford it - low income, historically underserved, those with mental and physical disabilities and ESL learners. Equity demands that you demand our schools open- with these students first in line, and a gradual opening to all 12 grades.

While getting teachers vaccinated early is a laudable goal, we cannot make opening our schools contingent on it. You have no control over when that will happen - it is still very unclear how long it will take to get teachers vaccinated. More importantly, schools are open safely without vaccines all over the country -vaccines are an added layer of protection - not a precondition.

Oregon is last or dead last at opening schools, despite being one of the best states in the nation on COVID spread. It is embarrassing and as legislators you must demand that our state do better by our children.

Finally, I want to recommend you John Canzano's column a few weeks ago - Hope is a Dangerous Thing. In it, he talks about a school board considering reopening and he rightly points out that the most dangerous thing is not hope; but the absence of it. We are close to our children losing hope. Losing hope in the adults in their lives; losing hope in the institutions of this State. They know that schools are open all over the country - they see it on social media every single day. Kids going to school, playing sports, going to school concerts. They know that schools are open all over the country safely and when we can't provide a science-based answer for why they aren't open here - and, let me be very very clear that we cannot provide that answer - it is fair for them to lose hope. Please don't let that happen. Thank you.

- Kim McGair
Portland