

Dear Senators,

In the spring of 2019 when my daughter and I were participating in a Red for Ed march and standing behind the banner of my own union local, I could not have imagined this day when I'd be writing this letter. That day, my daughter (then a third grader at Rieke elementary in PPS) and I talked about what to put on her sign for the march, and she listed everything she valued about school: "friends," "teachers," "science," "reading," "community," "justice." She decided to write this sentence on her sign: "Schools teach kids love and power."

In the spring of 2020, school closed abruptly and teachers threw plans together. Her teachers--a veteran third grade teacher and an exceptional student teacher--did an amazing job of staying in touch with each student, creating lessons kids could work on independently, and making space for them to process their experiences of the pandemic. It felt like a relationship that was continuing. They even drove by our house--twice--in a parade so that we could see them and maintain that feeling of connection.

Our kindergartener, though, still cried every time he had to login to a meeting with his teacher. His teacher was meeting students with small groups and doing her best to reach kindergarteners with glitchy technology, but my son didn't perceive it as the real thing. He was adamant: "that's not school."

Teachers were working hard, and so were parents who were facilitating their kids' educations in adverse conditions while also working full-time from home. Every day, we did everything we could to keep kids' spirits up and support their learning. It felt like a full-time job all on its own in impossible circumstances. We imagined how hard this must be for families with in-person jobs and fewer resources. We thought about where and how to donate, wishing we could do more even while stuck at home.

In the summer we prepared for a hybrid schedule. We knew it would be tricky to manage, but we were so glad that our kids would be able to have just a little bit of safe contact with their school community every week.

The announcement of a full online schedule for fall 2020 was a huge disappointment. Oregon's case counts were still among the lowest in the nation. Our epidemiologist friend was sending his kids to school in a Chicago suburb based on a public health consensus about the real benefits of school and its safety when masks are worn and students are spread out. I read about other countries that closed school last and opened them first. I became angry about the fact that in Oregon, bars were open but schools were closed. As our middle-class peers drained their savings to pay for nannies and pods so that parents could work, we put our faith in the public system and decided to give it our best try. Keeping money and kids in the system, and experiencing it in much the same way as those with fewer options, seemed like the most ethical choice.

Teachers, I learned from friends who teach in PPS, meanwhile had to pivot on a dime to remote instruction with little training. All summer, the district had been preparing for hybrid instruction. Our children's teachers weren't able to use the platforms they had used in the spring, and they were expected to teach synchronously for most of the regular school day. This meant less of the small group work that had been critical to our spring experience. It meant our children would be learning on platforms not designed for teaching children. Even in the best case, they'd have Zoom fatigue as badly as the rest of us.

Our first-grader's teacher does an exemplary job of duplicating a classroom environment via Google Meet. Still, it was heartbreaking at first to watch a six-year-old raising their hand, eager to participate, knowing the teacher couldn't even see him. For us as parents, supporting his learning is a part-time job. He has several assignments each day that he needs to do, many of which require printing, recording, and photographing. We have materials for him that we're supposed to pick up each week during what would normally be working hours. We have to manage multiple transitions per day on and off the computer. And we have to do what we can to give him meaningful physical and social breaks from a day spent looking at a screen. Every single day, we have to motivate him to sit down at his desk (which we had to purchase) and pay attention. To the extent that this works, it works because we're finding the time and resources to make it work.

Our fourth-grader's experience with Comprehensive Distance Learning, on the other hand, was dystopian. Her teacher (as she told the children frequently) was a year from retirement and knew almost nothing about computers, let alone online instruction. She seemed to think we'd be returning to the classroom any day. As I tried to support my daughter's learning, I was confused. It seemed like no teaching was happening; like the work was not grade-level; and like the teacher didn't understand how the students were supposed to submit the work. I scheduled a conference with her and confirmed that there were no lessons, the scope and sequence of the canned curriculum she was required to use was confusing to her, and she didn't in fact understand how children were supposed to submit work. However, this didn't keep her from scolding them about it, by name and publicly in class. She assigned students to read a book she had no intention of providing. She had them watch a video on the presidency, a cartoon, so old that it stated that no person of color had been president. She told them not to bother their parents about their assignments and just try to do them on their own. Un-managed discussions amongst the students were a cacophony that was impossible to follow, and in the days I shadowed the class, several of them cried during these meetings. The teacher scolded students about the way their eyes were moving or not moving when they were reading from the screen. On the day I pulled my daughter, the teacher said, "None of you know how to write, none of you!" At this point, she hadn't taught a single writing lesson.

This isn't a story about a bad teacher. It's a story about a system that pivoted to online learning without adequate training, appropriate platforms, ongoing technical support, or a solid plan about how to make learning materials available; didn't evaluate its success or failure; and never surveyed families in a meaningful way about what they were experiencing. Instead, we receive self-congratulating emails from the district about how well they're meeting our needs.

At great personal effort and some expense, I am essentially homeschooling my daughter. She remains enrolled in PPS. To be counted as in attendance, all she has to do is email her teacher. But PPS isn't educating her. The school we believed in and relied on wasn't there for us. I won't violate her privacy by talking in detail about my concerns for her mental health, but I will say that her therapist (who we were so lucky to find in the midst of high demand for their services) said that many of the symptoms of depression and compulsive behavior that she's experiencing are sadly understandable right now given the isolation that kids have had to go through.

When I read about the Portland Association of Teachers' bargaining position--no return to school until COVID is essentially gone--I'm deeply concerned about the future of public education in my city. Not in every case, but in many, **the Comprehensive Distance Learning we're experiencing in PPS is simply not meaningful public education. To the extent that it "works," it works at an unsustainable cost to families. CDL was created as a stop-gap measure. It can't become "business as usual."**

One year is 1/6 and 1/9 of my children's lives, respectively. For me that's the equivalent of 5-7 years of my life. That's a period of time that can change the way you see yourself, the way you understand who you are. I read statements from PAT leaders about how kids will "catch up." Education is more than achievement or preparation; it's students' growth and development, both individually and collectively. Education, like children themselves, has intrinsic worth. It's one of the ways that children understand that they matter to the world outside their household. You can't "catch up" to the loss of that understanding. I never dreamed that I would have to argue that point to public school teachers.

At first glance, teachers' reluctance to return to the classroom is understandable. Schools closed with very low COVID numbers, so why in the world would we open them now when numbers are higher? Teachers speaking publicly emphasize that people will die if we do this. Can't we wait till "everyone is vaccinated"?

However, we know more about COVID transmission now than we did in the spring. **Opening schools is relatively safe.** They are not a source of community spread, and they are--remarkably--not a place where masked and distanced children transmit the virus to adults. We know a lot about the aggregate risks of children being out of school. This [open letter](#) from a group of Chicago pediatricians and epidemiologists sums up the research well, and even in the last six weeks since this letter was published, more has come out.

We also know that, although case numbers will hopefully decline, COVID will continue to exist for quite some time. The list of fully eradicated communicable diseases is very short: smallpox, rinderpest, and (effectively) polio. There is absolutely no reason to believe that COVID will be added to this list within the coming decades, let alone months. A vaccine for children is not even on the horizon. And even if it becomes available--in a year? optimistically?--vaccination rates in Portland public schools are nothing like 100%. **The COVID-free normal that teachers are asking us to wait for doesn't exist--it is a fantasy, though an understandable one.**

Leadership will be needed to bring back public education in Oregon. To the extent that some of this leadership must be yours, I urge you to:

- Ensure that decisions about school closure and reopening are based on knowledge of public health rather than the personal fear of individuals. It appears that both Kate Brown and Colton Gill have come to understand that research points to the clear necessity of reopening schools before students are vaccinated. Work with them on making it happen safely.
- Provide funding to meet teachers' demands for safe work conditions upon returning to school. Many of their demands are reasonable and necessary for safe return.
- Ensure that both teachers and students who choose not to return to in-person school will be robustly accommodated through online learning that is much, much better than what's currently provided. Online learning, which many colleges have learned to do reasonably well through meaningful training and purpose-built platforms, will no doubt be a part of K-12 education for years to come as COVID continues, at some level, to be with us. Distance learning should always be an option rather than a default, but Oregon must lean into it.

Thank you for considering this.

Sincerely,

Jessica Johnson