

Dear Senate Committee on Education,

First, I want to say how much I appreciate how thoughtful and careful both the district I work for, David Douglas, and the district my children attend, Parkrose, have been this school year. Their decisions around CDL and delaying LIPI have shown that the health and safety of students, staff, and families are priorities for them. I have been very proud of the decisions that they have made thus far.

My students are learning and making progress on their speech and language goals. They are engaged in our sessions, and excited and happy the majority of the time, much like during a typical school year. I work with families of my students to help their children be as successful as possible. Is it always a smooth journey? No. However, in person learning in a typical year is the same. There are always challenges and struggles, no matter the setting. My children are learning the traditional school subjects in elementary school of reading, writing, math, science, as well as technology skills, patience, scheduling, and connecting with others in new ways. Comprehensive Distance Learning can be successful if it is well done.

Most educators and many parents recognize how valuable our regular school environment is, and we would love for it to be safe to head back into buildings. Pandemic fatigue has certainly set in for everyone, and a return to normalcy would be wonderful. Sadly, the pandemic is not over and right now we are in the worst of it. As of Saturday December 26th 1 in every 1000 Americans had died from the COVID-19 pandemic, this rate has only continued to increase. We should not relax the measures that have been keeping Oregon's cases among the lowest in the nation.

Many districts have not made decisions with the health and safety of students and staff at the forefront. This has resulted in resignations from dedicated and experienced educators, parents withdrawing students from schools, and increasing rates of COVID-19 in their communities. I have been happy to say Parkrose and David Douglas have made conscientious decisions.

Unfortunately, after the latest rounds of news from the governor to make the metrics advisory rather than mandatory, and to increase the risk level that Oregon considers acceptable for in person learning, I am worried, frustrated, and nervous. I was in tears most of the day the news was released. With extraordinarily poor timing the governor crushed the hopes of Oregon educators and parents that they will be able to keep themselves and their families safe. I do not know how your committee views her decision to make the already loosened and unsafe metrics advisory rather than a requirement. I hope that like many of your staff and families, you were shocked at this decision. This was a slap in the face to the educators in Oregon who have been working tirelessly to ensure students are benefitting from Comprehensive Distance Learning and to parents who are supporting their children through it at home. My children love school and learning, but both of my school age children have expressed that they do not want to go back while coronavirus is still a big concern. When I described to them what in person schooling would look like right now (masking, distance from friends and

teachers, less kids able to be in the classroom, no sharing materials, etc.) both of them said that distance learning is better. This is not to say that there haven't been challenges and struggles with distance learning, there have. For both my children, me as a parent, and me as a speech language pathologist providing teletherapy at the same time.

I am appealing to you to prioritize health and safety of Oregon's students, staff, and the families of both. Academic skills can be recovered, improvements can be made where needed to distance learning, and families and teachers can work together.

December brought the most cases and most deaths in Oregon. Hospitals were filling up close to capacity. I read of a Springfield man and wife (an Educational Assistant in Springfield), who were turned away from a hospital because he was over 65 and they could not prioritize him, despite his severe need from COVID-19. It is most definitely not safer now to return than it was when we first closed buildings in March. We are sure to see another spike in cases due to many Oregonians continuing to socialize, travel, and decline to wear masks despite mandates. The new variant originating from the UK has been identified to be in the community here already, California has a homegrown variant that is even more concerning. The US is far behind in genome sequencing, it is likely to be here as well. These variants are more transmissible and appears to be affecting children more than other variants. London has decided to additionally close all of their primary schools. They have pediatric wards in hospitals full of children with Covid-19 for the first time in this pandemic. In the US one million children had Covid-19 by November 12th. An additional one million had been diagnosed by December 24th. We are already over 2.5 million pediatric cases at this point. It is no coincidence that this dramatic increase in pediatric rates has occurred after many states had opened in person learning. Oregon should continue to keep to the priorities of student, staff, and community health and safety.

To continue these priorities would require maintaining or returning to Comprehensive Distance Learning until such a time as case rates have lowered significantly, all adults who desire vaccination have received both injections and had the appropriate amount of time past the second injection for the vaccinations to be effective. This means that all adults who desire vaccination in student and staff families should also be vaccinated. Currently researchers do not know if the vaccines will prevent transmission of COVID-19. Therefore family members are at risk if they have not been vaccinated. Students are also at risk, and there is not yet a vaccine approved for them. That is why case rates also need to be lowered significantly, to decrease the likelihood of transmission in schools. The original metrics of 10 cases/100,000 population are still the ones most supported by scientific data and aligns with the CDC guidelines as posing the lower and lowest risk of school transmission of COVID-19. Studies coming from places like the UK prior to their new variant also show that young children are the most likely to infect family members.

In addition, the ventilation systems in all schools would need to be up to the standards required for filtering COVID-19. This virus is airborne. The data to prove so now

exists. There have even been incidents of exposure from 20 feet away in less than 5 minutes. As children will be eating at school, the ventilation systems must be adequate. Indoor dining poses a huge risk, as evidenced by the closures of indoor restaurants. Children eating at school in either a classroom or a cafeteria is indoor dining. If they are eating breakfast and lunch then this is two times a day where the virus could be spreading between them.

While many in leadership positions in Oregon are claiming that school transmission does not occur, they have shown no evidence of this. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Schools here are not doing comprehensive testing of the students that are in person, whether or not they have symptoms. Cities and districts that are tracking, and testing, students and staff are showing that transmission is occurring. In LAUSD one in ten asymptomatic children tested positive when they did comprehensive testing. A study that is being conducted in Austria is also demonstrating transmission in schools is occurring. Genome sequencing in Germany has tracked an outbreak from one individual at a school to dozens of families, school being the only connection. This virus is deadly for children and adults, as well as causing what may be irreparable damage to many of those that survive it.

I know there are families clamouring to return in the state of Oregon, I have followed their "movement" closely. The majority of those pushing for this return do not live on the east side of Multnomah County. The risk levels and challenges east of 82nd avenue are far different from Lake Oswego and the west side of PPS. Opening schools increases the risk level for our already at risk populations even more. To me, no death is acceptable, not to mention the high percentages of long haul COVID, increasing rates of MIS-C in children, and the unknown long term neurological, cardiac, and respiratory damages for children and adults.

I understand that there are many flaws to CDL, that there are needs of struggling families that must be addressed. I can understand some of the financial challenges many are facing. We have also struggled financially in the past year and other recent years, and I know I have been lucky and privileged to be able to keep working from home and earning a paycheck safely.

I am also privileged that I can keep my children home safely all year, regardless of what decisions school boards and the government make. My father lives with us, and while it will be a lot to ask of him should I have to return to a school building in David Douglas, my children will not be returning until it is safe. Until he is vaccinated, I would also be putting him at risk. I lost my mother 5 days before I turned 10 years old. I don't want to risk my family, my students, my coworkers, or any of the families connected to us through school. Knowing I can keep my children home is not enough. I want the best protection for their educators and school staff members, for their friends and their families. COVID-19 has already impacted several families at our local school that we know. I'm sure there are many others that I am unaware of. I advocate that for the safety of all, distance learning is maintained, or returned to, until it is actually safe, not just because the regulations say in person is allowed. The CDC metrics have been

unchanging in their risk levels. We need to align to those. Let's keep Oregon on the path of having some of the lowest numbers of cases and deaths in the United States.

Sincerely,

Jillian Joinson

Mother and speech-language pathologist