

To: Senate and House Committees on Education
From: Nancy Willard, Embrace Civility, <http://embracecivility.org> and <http://bepositivelypowerful.com>
Email: nwillard@embracecivility.org. Cell: 541-556-1145
Re: School Reopening and Emotional Concerns of Students and School Staff
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The Senate Hearing on School Reopening was very illustrative. Three state leaders, Lindsey Capps, Colt Gill and Dean Sidelinger promised it would be safe to open schools to unperson learning because there are 162+ safety requirements that schools are mandated to follow.

As John Lawson, from OEA noted and I have also found, there are ample examples of schools that are not following the safety regulations. There are also no effective mechanisms to ensure that they do. School staff cannot report to ODE for fear that their district will retaliate. Reports to OSHA are bogged down and generally do not result in any positive outcome. Granting districts immunity from litigation appears to have led to greater flouting of the requirements.

What must be made totally clear is that after Capps, Gill, and Sidelinger said “yes, we should open,” the representatives from OEA, OSEA, PTA, Oregon Student Voice, and Kairos PDX all said “not so fast.”

This is evidence of the profound gulf in understandings between state leadership and teachers, school staff, parents, and students in this state. Concerns associated with this gulf will continue until the state leaders stop preaching and start to listen.

The most profound concern to come out of this session is the expectation that students from traditionally underserved populations absolutely should return to school — when these students and their family members are at the highest risk of serious illness or death from Covid. To lie to Oregon parents and tell them it is safe to send their child to school when it clearly is not is highly irresponsible.

What was not adequately addressed in this hearing is the profound emotional distress that is being experienced by school staff. This stress is most profound in those districts where the leadership has reopened schools to in-person instruction or keeps going back and forth on plans to do so.

It is not possible to expect that teachers and other staff will be able to adequately meet the emotional needs of students if they themselves are experiencing profound trauma and are worried every hour of every day that they will become infected and either experience long term health concerns or die or expose a family member to this.

What to Do

Improve the quality of remote instruction and services

Listening to Audrie Fox, from Oregon Student Voice, it is clear that some districts/teachers are not using the best approaches for the delivery of remote instruction and provide support to students. Apparently, some students still do not have sufficient access.

Because too many districts are focusing on whether or how they should open, they are not focusing sufficient attention on how best to offer remote instruction. There needs to be a reduction in the amount of time students are expected to watch live-stream lectures and a shift to more project based learning in teams.

It is also necessary to increase opportunities for students to engage in socialization. This can be accomplished through remote extracurricular activities.

There are clearly concerns of the emotional well-being of staff, students, and families. A significant amount of the federal resources that have been provided should go to district to support retaining more staff with the expertise to support students and families, as well as other approaches to support the emotional well-being of staff, students, and families. All school staff need better professional development in trauma informed practices to gain insight into practical ways they can better support students' emotional needs remotely.

Upgrade facilities

All schools must be assessed to determine the capabilities of their ventilation system. Improvements must be made. No students or and only a few staff should be in buildings with inadequate ventilation. Providing independent proof of adequate ventilation must be considered a requirement for opening to in person instruction.

A significant amount of the federal funds will be needed to accomplish this. This will take time.

Delay the offering of in-person instruction

Schools should not offer in person instruction until the rates in the communities are far lower. Remember, the state leadership said that it is safe at the current metrics because of the 160+ safety requirements. As there is clear evidence these requirements are not being abided by or enforced, the current levels are clearly not safe. Period — full stop.

Aiming for May 1 for gathering in person is likely advisable. At this time, most of the classes can be offered outside. When students return, the primary focus should be on their well-being. They should be offered extensive opportunities for interactions with peers — still distanced because they will not be vaccinated. Plenty of opportunities for creative writing, art expressions, and other expressions must be provided.

Efforts should also be put into place to encourage student learning over the summer. All students should be encouraged to make a commitment of engaging in 30 minutes of free choice reading every day and doing 5 math worksheets at their current level during the summer. This will do more to keep and catch up the students than anything else. If schools offer summer school, the focus should be on creative learning projects.

Prepare for a solid reopening next fall

This was the sage guidance of Kali Thorne Ladd. Don't try to piecemeal things now.

We need better assessment of where students actual are in their learning. Plans need to be developed for how schools are going to be reorganized to best serve all students, who will likely be at different levels than they are normally expected to be.

However, it is ESSENTIAL that we not greet students next fall with evidence of how far they are behind and how much work they need to do to catch up. This would be extremely distressing. We need to back off of all requirements of students to meet the arbitrary learning objectives. They need ample time to recoup and regroup.

Of significant concern will be the well-being of those students who normally have challenges who have been loving remote instruction. This includes students who are neurologically diverse — ASD, ADHD, ADD — as well as students who experience anxiety or bullying at school.

We know from the research that suicides increase when students return to school from the summer. There will be a high risk of suicide and school violence next fall.