

To Whom It May Concern:

I am respectfully requesting you take the time to consider and ponder my multifaceted point of view. I know I am not the only person who feels this way and am taking this opportunity to speak on behalf of others who have requested me to do so.

My frustrations as a taxpayer:

The primary purpose of public school is the education of students, not the employment of teachers. It should be accessible for all students to receive a fighting chance at bettering their future and give them the tools to become the best version of themselves. Teachers are getting the same pay (if not more due to salary increases) than they were a year ago. They're undoubtedly working a full work week, earning the paycheck they expected. But what happens to other industries when the results they produce diminish and fail? Pay cuts, lay-offs, and business closure are all side effects of that. Why is public school different? We're still paying the same amount in taxes, but with failing results. We're not getting the same product we're paying for, so why haven't taxes been cut?

My frustrations as an employee:

As a first responder/front line worker, I have heard the term "essential" more times in the past year than the entirety of my life prior to the onset of COVID-19. Every job is essential to someone, but some jobs require physical response and increased risk of injury and illness (not only to the employee but also to their loved ones) all for the sake of others. Our society cannot function without these "essential" employees. These employees have had to respond to their job sites, regardless of receiving a vaccine, much less both doses, and the likelihood of becoming infected by the population they serve is excessively higher than that of a teacher. Is it stressful, scary, and difficult at times? Yes, but it is necessary. The proper, adequate, and accessible education of children is also necessary. Public school teachers have no hurdles that other essential employees haven't had to face. And the State apparently deems public school teachers and staff to be essential, because they have been given access to the vaccine, even if many of them are low risk and the population they serve is low risk.

My frustrations as a citizen:

Society is so concerned today, and rightly so, with the issues of inclusivity, equity, and equality. Yet during distance learning, children are only immersed in and surrounded by the race and culture that is present in their own household. Play groups, sports, and gatherings have been discouraged, even outlawed; Instead of learning inclusivity and unification, they're becoming exclusive and divided. People treat each other like everyone has the plague and the reality is children are very low risk to adults and other children.

My frustrations as a parent:

Over the past ten months, I have witnessed problematic changes in all my children, but most especially in my three school age ones. My seventh grader was once a bubbly, social, goofy pre-teen. She took pride in participating in Honor Roll and had determination and drive to keep up her grades. Now I watch her grades fluctuate weekly between A's, B's and F's. She seems to be floundering and the only response I get from her teachers is "we're all doing the best we can."

Have you ever tried explaining to an emotional pre-teen that her best efforts just aren't good enough and not be able to provide any assistance for her? She has become depressed and doubtful in her own abilities, even if I attempt to reassure her that it's not her fault. Because it's not her fault. It's not her fault that it is difficult for her to learn over a computer screen, that she has no hands-on experience—which is the best way she learns, that she has siblings who still have to be tended to, and that her parents who now have to fill the void her teacher once filled has to divide their attention and can't give her the help she needs.

My fifth grader is my most social child. He is an extrovert and gets his energy from others. He has best learned in a group setting and loves to compete with his classmates. They were his motivation to do his best. He is also my most athletic child. He loves all sports, but especially football and basketball. His love of sports drives his desire for fairness and teamwork. That has all been taken away. He has gained weight and now grunts at my encouraging and even insisting that he go get fresh air. After his focus and motivation to work alone has expired, he begins distracting his siblings from their studies because he needs peer interaction.

My first grader is my most stubborn child. Having an Autumn birthday, he is older than most of his class and having two older siblings, he is typically more advanced than his peers. He excelled in kindergarten and was well on his way to reading independently. He is also very sensitive and provided a "helper," protector, and defender role for his classmates, as his off the charts height had him towering over them. In the past eight months, we have seen behavioral issues emerging. He is having difficulty controlling his emotions, verbally expressing his frustrations, and losing any sort of patience he once had. His math and reading skills have regressed and he is not patient enough with himself to push himself to do better.

A common thread I've noticed in my own children is concerning and declining academics, worsening behavior and social skills, lack of activity, interest, and motivation, diminishing hope due to constantly changing metrics and requirements by the state, teachers union, and school district, disconnection from peers, and deteriorating intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. All three have experienced concerning weight gain due to lack of athletic resources. Closed gyms, closed school district fields and gyms, and canceled sports seasons are detrimental to physical health. Weather prevents outdoor play and physical activity unless I want my children to develop colds and other illnesses. Lack of reliable internet excludes virtually streaming exercise routines and regimens. A recent visit to the doctor confirmed my guess that childhood obesity has increased significantly over the past ten months in Oregon. And what about all this screen time?

Our State is so focused on the imminent threat of COVID-19 that it fails to see the ripple effect. Earthquake aftershocks can be just as damaging and deadly as the initial earthquake. That is happening here too, but in a more gradual and less obvious way. The results from the precautions will be just as detrimental, if not more, when all is said and done, than the actual virus itself.

In conclusion, please keep in mind that ten months ago, we staunchly followed CDC and WHO guidelines. Why aren't we following them now? Even they say the safest and healthiest place for children to be is in the classroom. Districts are reporting record unenrollment numbers, failing

grades, and students are being left behind. The State's requirements and guidelines are failing our students and an entire generation. I implore teachers to remember why they got into this field, we all know it's not for the paycheck. They did it for the good of students, not themselves. People in service industries (especially low paid ones) are not doing it for their own good, but for the good of those they are serving. Distance learning has not been successful for the majority of Oregon's students and families, no matter how you try to spin it. It's well past time to get students back in the classroom and back to artistic, creative, and athletic outlets. Our kids NEED it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Lucy Astorga  
Mt Angel, OR