

Good afternoon,

I trust that you are aware of the difficulties faced by students participating in distance learning, including a higher incidence of course failure, lack of participation, depression, emotional withdrawal, inequitable experiences among race and financial status, to name a few. There are an increasing number of studies showing that schools are not responsible for increased spread of Covid-19. While the virus continues to spread, it is not more widespread as a result of students attending school. Furthermore, young healthy people are at very low risk of a negative outcome from this disease.

Being a parent of a Hermiston High senior, I implore you to include high school students in your opening plans. Seniors can't wait! There is no "next year" for them. I've read that FAFSA applications are down this year due to a disconnect between students and counselors. My son is struggling with the format of distance education. He misses the interaction with students and with his teachers. He is feeling discouraged over his difficulty in understanding. His mental health is suffering due to lack of interaction with peers. His senior year was supposed to be filled with opportunities to fine tune his plans for the future. Job shadows, internships and college visits are either nonexistent or virtual. The future of sports is uncertain. School clubs are cancelled.

While I understand the difficulty of younger students participating in distance education, returning to school will likely be easier for older students. They will be more compliant with hand washing, masks, social distancing and other precautions.

Here is an excerpt from WA Governor Inslee's legislative update on January 26:

"I believe that we can open up our schools safely now as long as we use proper hygiene and good systems. We have proven this. We have proven this because there are over 100,000 pupils in the state of Washington who have been doing this safely for months now. This is not an academic exercise."

...

"There's no zero risk. Anytime you step out of your living room, there's some risk, right? There's no zero-risk environment ... We're not asking more than we've asked of our grocery clerks. We have asked our grocery clerks to go on site and do their job and as a result we have food to eat. We're not asking any more than we've asked of our bus drivers who've now gone onto buses to make sure we can commute. It's not anything more than we've asked of our childcare providers, and they've stepped up to the plate. Or the firefighters. Or the police officers. So to the extent that communities do make a decision to go back to onsite learning, they're asking educators no more than they have asked the other parts of our community that make us safe and help our community thrive."

Please join me in fighting for the choice to have in-person learning for ALL students. The lockdowns have been detrimental to their health and well-being. This is a case where the cure is worse than the disease.

Thank you for your time,
Lori Spencer