

Dear Chairperson and Committee Members,

I am in strong support of opening schools for kids as soon as possible, while still following spacing and health guidelines to keep everyone safe. Based on what I am seeing, the effects of kids being out of school are severe and will potentially last longer than this pandemic.

I live in Corvallis, Oregon and have two kids, 8th and 10th grade sons, I teach middle school science at one of the two middle schools in Corvallis, and my husband is a community pediatrician. Between these three areas of my life, I feel that I have an above average understanding of what is happening with adolescents during the pandemic. I have seen my own children and many of their friends become depressed due to isolation and virtual school. My students are tired, sad, and struggling to stay motivated in online classes. It is true that some students are doing well and while this makes me very happy, it is definitely not the majority of kids. My husband and his pediatric colleagues in our community are seeing kids in pain, depressed, anxious, and not hopeful. Kids are hurting and in pain to varying degrees. You can describe it as kids being “flat” instead of thriving.

In all honesty, I am not worried about academics, at least for adolescents. Most older students will be able to make up gaps in understanding in the coming years in order to graduate, although our most at risk students need face-to-face instruction desperately right now. I have seen the positive effect LIPI has had on several of these students. We started LIPI at the end of November and it has been transformational for several students already. I am severely worried about mental health, which is affecting kids now and will have a ripple effect in the future. Adolescents need to be together. This is a huge part of their development.

I understand that we have guidelines to follow in order to stay insured and safe. What worries me is that I am not seeing much of a change in the predominant narrative of the times, which seems to be “if we go back to school, it is unsafe and people will die.” I want to push back against this narrative and it would be very helpful for the state to also start doing this. Vaccines are coming and with that, it will be a completely different ballgame. Covid is not going away, it will still be here in the fall and many people will not be vaccinated, but kids need to be back in school, on a normal schedule by then. This is why we need to push the narrative so people start thinking, believing, and planning for normalcy. We need to all understand how important it is to shift to hybrid this spring in preparation for next year. Kids need to be back and we need to recognize this and prepare for it. If we can't shift our thinking, then we will have no momentum to get kids back in school and that is not acceptable.

Thank you for all you are doing during this very challenging time. I appreciate the opportunity to testify and share my opinion.

Sincerely,

Alexis McQuillan