

## TESTIMONY

My name is Josie Cosentino and I am a junior at Mt. Lebanon High School in Allegheny County as well as a representative from the program GirlGov, the Women and Girls Foundations civic engagement and advocacy program for teens. My school has recently moved to the four day in person option, but I have chosen to stay fully online. As someone who, up until recently lived with my extremely immuno-compromised grandfather, Covid controls every choice I make.

When school moved to the Hybrid option back in October, I had to make a decision not just for myself, but for the health of my grandfather. As a sixteen year old, that was daunting. Online school felt exhausting and brain numbing, but in person school felt risk filled and anxiety inducing and so I chose to continue online out of fear of Covid. It's hard to make a choice that is literally life or death, but it's even harder to watch as your friends did not have the same responsibilities. On social media, I watch as people my age have parties and go on trips, and find myself wishing I was that free. I understand that they put themselves at risk, but I couldn't help but be jealous. And when more and more of them returned to school, my jealousy turned to anger. Anger at my friends, anger at the school, anger at everything.

Rather than let this anger overcome me, I looked at this challenging time and decided to focus my frustrations into self growth. At the beginning of junior year, I resolved that I would work hard to succeed. Every day I poured my all into everything I did, and for the first semester I achieved the results I had been hoping for. With the continuation of the second semester, it seems that the irritation of both the students and the teachers is only growing. It is practically impossible to not go a full day without hearing a teacher make a comment on how they wish we were all here or how much they hate using technology. As a fully online student, those comments hurt. They awaken feelings of guilt, leaving me wishing there was something I could do to alleviate the teacher's frustrations. I understand that this is not the teacher's fault, and just how difficult this time might be for them. All I am asking for is compassion, the mutual awareness that everyone else is struggling too.

I do, however, extend my own compassion to teachers. Educators were launched into an online format and asked to rapidly learn how to function in a way foreign to anything they have attempted

before. I watch as my teachers struggle to learn how to use google classroom, screenshare, or even unmute themselves. Teachers are in desperate need of support and training, and by helping them, you can help to ensure that the quality of student education, both online and in person, is no longer compromised.

As more people returned to school, and the numbers online dropped throughout the first semester, I watched as the attention given to online students decreased. There were times where I could go a whole class period without even seeing my teacher, as they taught outside of the video frame. It feels as though the quality of my education is being compromised because of a decision I made for the health of others. I am sure you are thinking “then why not return to school?” to which I respond “How could I take that risk, how could I put the lives of the people I love the most at danger?” It is hard to believe I live in a time where a choice between education and health is asked to be made.

I would like to also emphasize the deterioration of my own and others mental health. I have witnessed many of my friends fall into the deepest, most painful depressions of their lives. My own anxiety has reached unprecedented highs as everything around me seems to only increase my feelings of panic and uneasiness. And yet, the world is falling apart, but all I can care about is making sure my essay has been turned in on time. Students are hurting. Students are tired. Students are completely and totally overwhelmed.

When looking at the budget, I ask that the mental health needs of students be prioritized. Teenagers are going through one of the most difficult and trying times of their lives, the effects of which will be evident for years to come. We are going to require help to recover from abnormality and readjust to normalcy, and there is funding needed to achieve that. Further, you cannot expect students to withhold the same standards you have placed in the past. The idea of taking standardized tests is thoroughly ridiculous and unwise. Stress levels are at an all time high, mental health is rapidly declining. How can we expect students to function like normal when the world is anything but normal?

I also request that we pay particular attention right now to people of color throughout Pennsylvania, who are experiencing and have been experiencing a system stacked against them. Although this is not an issue I personally have gone through, my friends and peers in GirlGov have helped me

understand the importance of changing our curriculum and training our teachers to better accept the people of color attending our schools. I ask you to remember that Covid may be ravaging through our state, but the second pandemic of racism should not be ignored.

I am asking educators, parents and legislators to rethink how we are doing this. It is unreasonable and irrational to expect students to sit on a Zoom meeting for seven hours a day, or make a life or death decision that determines the quality of their education. I am not saying I have the solution to this. I am not saying there is a clear solution to any of this. but I do not understand why we can't look at covid and see it as an opportunity. An opportunity to change how we do things, an opportunity to look at what is wrong and fix it, and an opportunity to evolve.