

Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
Testimony on the Impact of Covid on Education

Presented by
Rachel Schlosser, parent
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Thank you to the committee members for calling this hearing today and taking the time to listen to parents and educators. My name is Rachel Schlosser and I am a parent and work as a non-attorney special education advocate. I have two children, each with very different disabilities who attend Pittsburgh Public Schools. My kids have been home, participating in remote learning since March of last year. As many of you are aware, the Pittsburgh Public School District has not yet returned to in person learning.

My son, who was born with an incredibly rare neurological condition, is in sixth grade and has developmental and intellectual disabilities. The way his condition impacts how he learns is complex. One of the things we, as his parents, have advocated for, is for our son to be included and have the opportunities to meaningfully participate in general education with his peers to the greatest extent possible. While the Pittsburgh Public Schools has provided devices to all students, internet service to those who need it, and a full day of synchronous instruction, for a complex learner like our son, this hasn't been enough to meet his needs. His current educational program requires a great deal of modification to curriculum and instruction, multiple related services, peer support, and a full time 1:1 aide, all of which are difficult to provide virtually, if at all.

His disability means that any benefit from instruction delivered over video either live or pre-recorded requires 100% dedicated support in order to attempt any meaningful participation. This is a level of support my husband and I are unable to provide. The burden on families of students with disabilities has always been high, but the Covid-19 pandemic and the various school closures have placed an unprecedented burden on families and caregivers. As a result, now going on a year, our son and many others, with and without disabilities, have not been able to learn or make meaningful progress. The impact of a year without access to education will be extremely difficult for many of our most vulnerable students to recover from. Many students will have missed an entire year of educational programming and many others have had a loss of skills and significant mental health and behavioral regression.

My daughter, on the other hand, has had, while challenging at times, a mostly positive online experience this year. She is in fourth grade and has a specific learning disability in reading. With occasional support from my husband and me and the implementation of a new assistive technology program, she is now able to access her synchronous instruction, asynchronous lessons, and complete independent work. I can see the progress she has been able to make academically this year despite the lack of return to in-person learning.

This Committee is having this hearing today because of the pandemic, but issues with inequitable funding and disparate resources existed well before this and continue to persist. What those inequities have meant for districts during the Covid-19 crisis became shockingly apparent on the day schools were closed, when some districts, whose students already had devices and plentiful access to wifi were able to pick right up with virtual learning, not missing a beat. While other districts, mine included, were devoting the most energy toward finding ways to feed students first, and provide devices and wifi second. Districts that already had a device for each student could use money and other resources to hire staff and improve virtual instruction while districts that did not have devices for students had to spend money and resources just getting their students the necessary equipment and access before any attention could be given to the instruction itself.

When resources are limited, districts are forced into the position of having to make moral and ethical decisions about which students and needs to prioritize. This is true now more than ever as students and families are now in competition with each other to prove which of their children are more deserving, further eroding trust in public education and destroying school communities. As more families leave to attend charter and private schools, districts will face diminished revenue.

Simply focusing on opening school buildings won't fix all the problems and it certainly won't guarantee access for all students. Many students won't be able to return to buildings until vaccines are available for all ages and community transmission is low. There are currently districts that are operating 5 days a week and not providing adequate virtual support to students who are unable to return to buildings. In these districts, opening buildings has meant that students with disabilities or students with health or multi-generational family needs have been ignored and isolated. Conversely in my district, the opposite is also true. Virtual instruction has largely been provided to students effectively, like to my daughter, but the students that need in-person instruction, like my son, have been unable to access it. Even if Pittsburgh Public opened its doors to in person instruction tomorrow, the hybrid learning model would most likely still fail to meet my son's needs. Without additional staff, teachers will be dividing their attention between the students in the classroom and the students they must teach simultaneously online, preventing them from giving the individualized instruction my son needs to fully access the curricular content and meet his IEP goals.

We must also admit that safety measures and school closures may persist into the fall and that there will continue to be students who need access to more effective virtual learning and there will be students who need safe, in-person instruction. We must provide resources to all districts in ways that allow them to provide both, not one at the expense of the other.

As a parent and an advocate, I have deep concerns that PDE's plan for Covid Compensatory Services will be woefully inadequate to make up for educational losses, especially for our most vulnerable students. We realistically do not know when students will be able to receive the full in-person instruction needed to deliver their complete educational programs. Nor do we know the entirety of the impact school closures has had on students with the most complex needs.

There are students who have now missed over 900 hours of instruction. That kind of loss can't be caught up over a few weeks this summer or next. Furthermore, complex learners like my son, can't learn any faster. Just like you can't just turn the oven up higher to bake a cake faster, we can't expect his brain to build connections any more or faster than it already does. Trying to "catch him up" is futile. What many students will need isn't simply "more" service, but the same services over a greater length of time.

Additionally, students haven't just lost out on special education services. There are students, like my son, who have also lost out on an entire year of curriculum and content standards. Covid Compensatory Services does not address this loss and there is no other mechanism to do so. The benefits he receives from being in general education classes with his peers are social, emotional, and academic. While the benefit we see is significant, it isn't always measurable. Since the benefit isn't easily quantifiable, we have no way yet to estimate the full impact of its loss.

Currently the Commonwealth educates students in their school age program from the age of 5 until the age of 21. Students who have lost a year of instruction and support can't simply catch up. We must give them the opportunity to recover the year they lost. Ensuring that all students, and especially those with disabilities, have access to a full 16 years of FAPE is essential to ensuring their ability to be college, career, and community ready. Please consider extending the age limit from 21 to 22 for all students who are of school age during the Covid-19 pandemic so that they may have the opportunity to access their full 16 years of public education.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.