

Thank you for this opportunity.

I am a teacher. I guess you could say I'm in the "business of learning". I talk to teachers everyday. We stand with our students and with their parents: We want schools to reopen.

Long before the pandemic, we teachers could have told you that online classes are a poor substitute for in-person instruction. Has virtual learning been all bad? No. Our kids have often demonstrated remarkable resiliency. They have grown in their learning and in their support of one another (and their teachers). They have offered technological expertise, empathy and words of encouragement—or signs of encouragement in the form of thumbs-up, heart emoji and smiley faces in the chat 😊. For many, online schools have yielded online tools, providing children with much-needed technology (laptops and internet service) at home. Some longstanding digital divides separating the "haves" from the "have-nots" in our educational system have begun to narrow. An unexpected perk of my own virtual classroom has been getting a glimpse of my students' interactions with their families and pets...at times a precocious younger sibling, cat or dog will make an appearance on screen to the delight of the entire class, teacher included. For a brief, precious moment I sometimes get to see my students in a new light; it is an honor and a privilege.

Despite fleeting moments of joy in online learning, there are also many downsides... We miss our kids. Our kids miss us and miss each other. This is hard! While we work extremely hard to engage our kids and never stop learning and developing new skills to ignite that fire in them, we know that for some of them this is just not working. Many are not as interested online as they would be in person: The screen is no match for a person who cares. While we respect our students' right to privacy, not being able to see their faces when they remain off camera severely limits or negates our ability to read important visual cues—or to give timely words of praise, comfort or encouragement. Virtual social skills cannot replace the learning that comes from face-to-face interactions and reading body language...Again, we all want schools to re-open, so....

What is on my *personal* wish-list for PA legislators? I ask that you please help my students, my colleagues and me return safely to in-person *learning* not in-person

testing. How? Make safety visible by following the roadmap outlined by the CDC and support the good work of Senators Williams and Martin:

1. Continue layered mitigation strategies.
2. Secure testing so we can track asymptomatic spread.
3. Ensure vaccination prioritization is aligned with the re-opening of schools: If the mayor of Washington, DC can see to it that all school employees who want to get vaccinated get the vaccine before returning to school--and the governors of OH, WV & OR can follow suit—then perhaps so can we here in PA, as well.
4. Senator Williams and Senator Martin of have lobbied for no standardized testing requirement for the 2020-2021 school year. They are on the right track. Our kids do not need to be tested for us to know that their overall learning has suffered during online schooling. Testing will interrupt the learning taking place, require teachers to halt instruction to become test administrators, require teachers to stop planning lessons and start planning testing and makeup sessions—all in service of whom, I ask? I submit that testing will wrongly shift our focus to trying to find out what kids *lost* rather than trying to provide what our kids *need*; a sense of stability, support, and continued instruction uninterrupted by arduous testing schedules.

If you suspect that online learning is not as effective or beneficial to students as in-person instruction, you are absolutely correct! Our kids, their parents, their families, us teachers....we've *all* had enough! Only one thing could keep us apart; the valid concern we have for each other's safety. This pandemic continues to take lives of the people we love. In class we rejoice together when someone says they or someone in their family had COVID, but they are getting better. In class, we grieve together when someone says they have lost a loved one. Please help all of us to follow the roadmap outlined by the experts at the CDC so that we may return safely to school as quickly as possible and get on with the "business of learning", together!

Thank you again for this opportunity.

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