

Hello, members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Kyle Christensen. I have children in Fourth, Sixth and Eighth Grades in Farmington, ISD 192.

We know COVID-19 is a real and serious illness. For some, it poses considerable risk of complications. For a few, it can be even worse. One of the challenges however has been understanding and balancing the actual risks to people with the costs and tradeoffs of our public policy response.

Early on, we knew little about COVID-19. Without data or context, imaginations ran wild. Today, we know COVID-19 is not the indiscriminate killer once feared. We also know that the aggressive closures of schools and businesses are causing very real harm to children, families and communities.

We were all saddened when the State ordered schools closed last March, although we understood the need to do so at the time to prepare our health system. That sadness turned to grief for students, teachers and parents, when we learned there would be no return to classes last spring.

The Safe Learning Plan should have paved the way for a return to classes in the fall. Instead, it's arbitrary metrics created new barriers to quality education in public schools. As a result, we're uncertain when most kids will ever return to school full time.

Farmington Schools opened with the hybrid learning model in the fall. My kids were at school Mondays and Tuesdays, and did Distance Learning for Wednesdays and Thursdays. Friday's were catch up days for students and teachers. In November, like most districts across the state, Farmington transitioned to full Distance Learning.

My sense is Farmington Schools were better positioned for these learning models than many other districts. For many years, every student has had a District issued iPad. In fact, we haven't had a Snow Day since I can remember.

This is o.k. in the short term, but unworkable over the long haul. Our kids and their peers in public schools are struggling. Our daughter, Ella is in Fourth Grade. She misses her teachers and her classmates. She's not really connecting to the coursework. Each day is closer to an exercise in checking off the boxes.

For my Eighth Grader, Joshua, every very day is a challenge to keep up with assignments across several subjects, make it to virtual meetings, and navigate technology platforms (Schoology, Notability, etc.) for viewing videos, downloading assignments, completing worksheets and sending them to instructors.

It's Evan, our Sixth Grader who we worry about most. He's our child diagnosed with ADHD. He's got an IEP for academic and emotional/social development support. In distance learning, he's detached from school. He needs social interaction to go along with learning. Absent that,

he's not connecting with his teachers or his coursework. He's surrounded by distractions, including the videos and games just a click away. His teachers and support staff are doing their best, but the Safe Learning Plan has erected barriers even to kids like him getting the in-person support they need. He's falling behind academically and socially, and it's not easy seeing my son who used to love going to school dread each day because he just doesn't see the point.

The worst of all this is for us and every parent I speak to is the tears of frustration, and the evening's spent arguing about missed meetings, late assignments and falling grades. We all understand the need for sacrifice. But we're all done pretending that this is o.k. This can't become a precedent.

This isn't just about our students. State policy is failing our public school teachers too. I see their heroic efforts to hold together an unworkable system just enough. I see their late-night emails. I hear the exhaustion in their voices over virtual sessions with my kids. I'm also aware some of the tears shed come from our educators who know better than any of us that this detachment and isolation is not good for their students.

State officials would like us to believe only good has come from Stay at Home orders and Safe Learning Plans. The truth is those are destructive policies too. It is reported widely that our kids are failing academically, with racial and socioeconomic gaps widening and growing deeper.

Our kids' mental health is faltering. According to the CDC, the proportion of mental health-related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively. MDH also reported drug overdose deaths among young people increased 31% during the first half of 2020. I've spoken to pediatric nurses alarmed by the rapid increase in patients admitted to their care for self-harm and attempted suicide.

I'm grateful this committee is listening. Until now, concerns like ours have been unwelcome in Saint Paul. Here, concerns for job and economic security are "greedy." Those who fear for the health and safety of their children are "selfish." And any other dissent gets dismissed as inconsiderate of the "greater good." I question what "greater good" they're talking about.

Our leaders put great faith in data and science. Well, the data and the science say that K-12 Education is safe. The experts say denying our children access to in-person learning is detrimental to their health and the health of our communities. It is in the interest of the greater good to restore in-person, classroom-based education to Minnesota K-12 schools.

Thank you for your time this afternoon. I hope our testimonies will help inform better, more sensible and balanced policies that restore high standards for education going forward.

Kyle Christensen
Farmington, Minnesota