

February 24, 2021

Dear Senate Education Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony relevant to remote and hybrid learning. My name is Dr. Caroline Danda. I am a licensed child psychologist, working in Johnson County KS, and the mother of three students in the Blue Valley school district in Johnson County: an 8th grader, a sophomore and senior. Blue Valley School District has been largely remote, with a few weeks in hybrid. Suffice it to say that distance learning does not work. Even in hybrid mode where students finally have contact and engagement in school during in-person days, instruction is extremely limited during at home days due to teachers' needing to focus on students in the actual classroom. The hybrid format is also disruptive to the consistency and structure needed for learning.

The social, emotional, and academic fall-out due to the isolation and disconnection associated with hybrid and distance learning is enormous. I see it in my house, where two of my three teens essentially failed all their classes last semester. This semester is not much better. I wonder if one child, who has ADHD and anxiety, will ever go back and be successful at school. He's gotten too used to being at home. I hear the same stories, every, single day, in my office, from my friends who are parents, from my colleagues, and from pediatricians. Students are increasingly isolated, depressed, anxious, and, honestly, many have learned to not care about school. Students are disengaged and fatigued by the amount of screen time, the workload, and the absence of a learning environment. At home, students do not have the same environmental cues, movement breaks, socialization, or connections to students or teachers that lead to engaging in learning or maintaining a sense of well-being. They are falling behind academically and suffering socially and emotionally. We not only have a COVID-19 pandemic. We have a mental health pandemic.

These are the facts, not just my opinion.

- The CDC shows anxiety and depression among adolescents has tripled since the pandemic began.
- A national 4-H council survey found more than 7 in 10 teenagers are struggling with mental health.
- At a recent Johnson County Commissioner's meeting, they noted that calls to the crisis hotline were up 35%.

Recent data from a voluntary survey from Blue Valley School District found that social emotional well-being is a concern locally:

- 42% of parents were extremely concerned or very concerned about their child's social-emotional well-being, with another 28% being somewhat concerned

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- 51% of staff were concerned a great deal or a lot about students' social-emotional well-being, with another 28% concerned a moderate amount
- 24% and 33% of high school students felt not at all connected or not so connected with other students, respectively; while 16% and 33% felt not at all or not so connected with adults at school, respectively.
- 12% and 25% of parents, , reported that it was difficult to very difficult, respectively, to focus on schoolwork

Although I do not have statistics regarding academics, personal and clinical experience tells me that student absences are high, grades lower, and learning decreased as students struggle to maintain focus and effort in their schoolwork when remote or hybrid. In order to learn, students need the structure, consistency, and relationships of going to school, in person, every day. The current distance and hybrid learning is not sustainable. They need to be in school as soon as possible, full time; regardless, many students will need help and support to regain their confidence in learning, rebuild effective learning habits, and reforge connections.

Research consistently shows that mitigation factors in place are effective in managing potential COVID-19, and that schools are not super-spreaders. Families were given a choice of whether to attend school in person or virtually. It is long past time to honor families' choices for their children to attend school in person, full time.

Thank you for your attention to our children's health and well-being.

Sincerely,



Caroline Danda, PhD
Licensed Psychologist