

April 12, 2021

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Dear Dr. Maryalice Russel,

I am writing to advocate moving middle and high school students back to in-person learning for more than the 4 hours and 20 minutes per week. I attended last weeks Q & A regarding the challenges to providing full-day instruction and I fundamentally understand those challenges.

After a year, it is time for Oregon to restore in-person school. I am mother of three children in the McMinnville School District, a MHS graduate, and a 6-12 educator at Dayton High School. I fundamentally understand the challenges our school districts face. However, it is time for our school district to work harder than we have ever worked before. We need to push through those challenges, think outside the box and figure out how to bring our middle and high school students back into classrooms.

Oregon and Yamhill County students suffer from policies that fail to align with current scientific understanding of COVID, which consistently demonstrate that schools are safe for in-person learning, full-time, five days per week, or two full days per week.

My children are straight A students, and log into zoom every day on time. The students I am fighting for are the students that have given up on remote learning. Unfortunately, I know these students all too well, because I teach 6-12th grade in various subjects. I have taught on Zoom all year. I saw how they eagerly they start the semester. I then saw them slowly drop their engagement; slowly drop off their participation, and fail to complete assignments.

This is not the intent of education. The Zoom model is not a long-term solution. Rather it is a temporary, short-term fix. All educators know there are many learning styles and know how critical it is to interact with our student's visual cues so we can adjust our instruction to their individual needs. This is not possible with Zoom teaching.

Let me tell you a story about my first day back with students. I currently have a student that I taught last year. He is very intelligent, and an auditory learner who

thrives on interacting with others. Last year he completed work on time. He struggled emotionally and lives with his Grandma, but we have a connection. At the beginning of this quarter, he warned me that he would miss a lot of class because he needed to help his little sister with her Zoom classes.

He initially attended a few Zoom classes, and then fully gave up. He has only turned in two assignments this quarter. Last week was the first day of in person, full day learning at Dayton High School. He came to me after class, one on one, and said, "As you know, I haven't done much of anything this semester. Is it still possible to pass my class? If I can, I would like to try." He spent extra time working on his classwork after school, and completed the assignments to pass my class. This story demonstrates why the in-person connection is so vitally important to student's learning and mental health.

There is no accountability through a zoom screen. There is no human interaction with their peers on a zoom screen. These young adults are still developing their pre-frontal cortex and vitally need good role models, accountability, guidelines, positive experiences (that they might not be getting at home) to motivate students to just function and live, to talk to other, but also to motivate them to be willing to dive into learning.

I attended the Q & A to find out what challenges the McMinnville School District is facing that limits students to 4 hours, 20 minutes per week of live instruction. Their response was problems with Bus transportation and the teacher's union agreement.

The Salem, Beaverton, and Sherwood school districts figured out a way to problem solve and put their student's needs ahead of their own challenges. The Salem School District now offers high school students two full days a week at high schools with 1900 students per school. I am sure they also had bus challenges, but they figured it out.

The MOU agreement is already antiquated and outdated. It needs to be renegotiated according to new CDC standards, which reflects the fact all educators have been offered the vaccine.

The CDC, as well as the Oregon Board of Education has already changed the 35 ft.² per student regulation. The extra prep time required by the MOU wouldn't be required if schools were to return students in person with the 3ft regulation as the CDC recommends because they wouldn't have to plan for Zoom as well as in-person teaching.

The McMinnville School District needs to work harder to re-negotiate the contract or find new teachers to work in our district that are willing to teach children in person. There are many, common sense strategies to remove the barriers of MOU and bussing including:

Sending new notices to parents clearly stating that transportation from school is the main barrier to full day education. You will then see the community spring into action with ride-share, caravans, so the students who really need the buses are the students using bus transportation.

The amount of federal COVID funding provided to schools and the excess of funding saved this year from not being in class (disposable supplies and paper products, ink etc.) could be re-allocated to hire additional local busses or contact out-of-area bus operators.

Reexamine grade school schedules to coordinate busses to allow high school and middle school student's additional access to bus transportation. The decisions in the district need to benefit the greater good. Perhaps the grade school students need to switch to two full days of class so middle and high school students can get additional hours in the classroom.

In conclusion, I urge the school board, administration, First Student Bus Companies and the McMinnville Education Association to reconsider their back to school plan. I recommend adding additional community resources to brainstorm ways to get our students back to school. If the administrators are facing challenges that they cannot solve on their own, they need to consult with other districts, which currently offer more in-person learning for their students.

Our students are worth the extra effort. There is no challenge too great for our community and our educators if we are motivated to find a solution. These students are our future leaders. They are our tomorrow. Please give them what they deserve after a year of miserable CDL and no after school activities. Our children's health, wellness, and education are at stake!

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jessie T. Everingham

CC: Amy Fast, McMinnville School Board, McMinnville Education Association, First Student Bus Company