

Dear School Board Members,

As educators, it is our responsibility to advocate for what we know is best for students, particularly under challenging circumstances. Over the past four months, we have made strong connections with students and families, achieved significant academic growth, and seen innovation and resilience from children in ways that we haven't seen before. At this time, we are advocating to delay a return to in-person instruction until the adults in the community can be vaccinated. Unless and until a vaccine is available and in use in our community, we cannot advocate for a return to in-person instruction to face circumstances that would remain unchanged since we first took steps to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Please know that it is our sincere desire to return to bring our children back to school. But with no change to the medical intervention available to us, a return to in-person learning prior to a widespread vaccination campaign will be harmful to all involved in a multitude of ways; most importantly, to the children we have promised to serve.

To that end, we would like to share our concerns around these topics:

1. The circumstances under which we are being asked to teach in person are drastically different during a pandemic – school is not the same as it once was. Due to the necessary safety requirements, a return to our school building means that teachers will not be able to implement many instructional practices that we are able to employ remotely. These practices include guided reading at targeted instructional levels, age-appropriate physical breaks, equity of access to visual materials, and collaboration between small groups of students. Perhaps most impactfully, we will not be able to comfort or reassure students with a smile or a hug – only words muttered through a mask at a six-foot distance. We would like to know: How have these expectations been communicated to families? Who is preparing students for how different school is going to be? What are the social and emotional repercussions of bringing students back to this highly restrictive environment, and what has the consideration been around this potentially negative impact?
2. It is impossible to ignore the increase in anxiety for children and adults during this time. We anticipate an even larger increase in anxiety for students as they return to a school that is very different from the place they have come to know and love. What supports will be available for students experiencing COVID related anxiety?
3. Many children at Ardmore receive Specially Designed Instruction. Two and a half hours will not be enough time for students to receive their instructional minutes according to their IEPs. Given that adults will not be available to support during asynchronous time, how will we ensure that students who participate in special education receive all of their instructional minutes?
4. Even in the best of times, there has been a shortage of substitute teachers in our district. While we have one substitute assigned to our building, we predict there will be more than one daily teacher absence due to COVID or COVID-like symptoms. Given the risk of over-exposure, what is the plan to protect our substitute teachers who may be asked to teach in multiple classrooms? What will happen if more than one teacher requires a substitute on the same day?
5. We recognize that a tremendous amount of work has been done to keep staff and students safe. Even with extensive safety measures, it is unlikely we will all walk away from this unscathed. With current cases at an all-time high, it is irresponsible to return to in-person learning when we

are within a reasonable time frame of receiving a vaccine. Given the outcome that seems most likely, how will staff and students be supported through an outbreak at school?

The communication provided by our district leaders consistently indicates that remote learning is failing, but that's not what we see. For many educators, this has been our most challenging year of teaching. And while it has not been easy, we have risen to the occasion to provide the best possible experiences for students and used our professional expertise to do what we do best: teach. We would like to share the following highlights with you:

- Our students are thriving – they have made strong connections with their peers and their teachers, and families are able to connect with teachers in unprecedented ways. These connections have led to increased communication, understanding of expectation, and collaboration around student needs. Further, students who have historically struggled in a traditional learning environment have found ways to participate, contribute, and experience success.
- Our students are innovating – our youngest learners surprised us all in independently learning to share their screens, navigate Clever, and send words or images of encouragement through the chat. We were even more surprised to find they were taking time to teach their peers these skills.
- Our students are growing academically – we are seeing academic achievement every day, and we have the evidence to prove it. Our scores in ANet, DIBELS, TRC, Unit Assessments, Freckle, Lexia, and Raz-Kids all indicate student achievement.
- Our students are attending – while mornings often begin with sleepy faces, last bites of breakfast, or even pajamas, these things do not exclude students from participating in school. Further, while a sniffling nose would exclude them from in-person instruction, students who are unaffected by mild symptoms such as these can still participate remotely.
- Our students are challenged – teachers provide targeted, small-group instruction in a continuous learning environment that is uninterrupted by transitions.
- Most importantly, our students are safe. They come to class smiling and eager to contribute, and we are able to learn together and celebrate successes. Our children and our staff are not afraid to participate in remote learning because we are confident it is safe.

Given all of these successes, we have to ask – How was it concluded that we are failing?

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many difficult decisions have been made. In March, the decision to close emphasized the value that the district has placed on the health and safety of our school communities. Over the summer, when choosing between virtual or hybrid, our staff and our families were under the impression that certain safety protocols would be followed. Those protocols have since changed, and so it seems, has the value of our lives. Where we once felt prioritized, we now feel misled. In these difficult times we must ask the difficult questions: Is the district willing to take responsibility for someone's life?

We recognize that remote learning is not the ideal environment for all students, but in-person learning during a pandemic presents us with even more challenges. As a staff, we continue to work each day to improve our practice, and we will continue to do so until we can safely return to an environment that is better than what we are currently able to provide. Bellevue School District is committed to affirming and inspiring each and every student to learn and thrive as creators of their future world. To

bring children back to an environment that is so restrictive is nothing short of a disservice and will certainly limit the ways in which students are able to think, achieve, and grow. You assure us that our ability to succeed is your priority, but a return under these conditions does not support that statement.

Over the past decade, Ardmore has worked through a myriad of changes and challenges. Our students and our staff are among the most resilient, yet this plan to re-open callously disregards our expertise in terms of what is best for student learning. It is our hope that you will address the aforementioned questions, concerns, and successes, by coming to speak with the Ardmore staff before any further steps are taken.

In Safety and Good Health,

*Members of the Ardmore Staff*