

1/12/21

Dear members of the Bellevue School District Board and Superintendent Duran,

We are writing to you as a group of educators from Medina Elementary who are sincerely concerned about the current plan to return to buildings for K-2 hybrid classes and many special education students throughout the district. We have a responsibility to advocate for our students and for what is best for them. We are writing to advocate a delay to return to in-person instruction until staff can be vaccinated. Unless and until it is available and in use in our community, we cannot advocate for a return to in-person instruction. Returning prior to vaccination is harmful to all members of our community.

As educators we are proud of what BSD and our staff have put into place since the change to in-person learning in March. We applaud the district for providing devices (along with countless hours of support for the use of those devices), internet, meals, and childcare. The changes in our work environment have required flexibility and innovation like we have never experienced before. We are working extra hours planning and adjusting materials to make them suitable for virtual learning, as well as learning new technology and teaching strategies. As educators we see the successes and hardships of our students and families every day. While we do see many students joyfully learning, we also see arguments, tension, and stresses in the homes of our students. As professionals and experts in our classes we are the most able and qualified to advocate for the needs of our students.

While we are proud of the many accomplishments of our district over the last 10 months, we also have serious concerns with the current plans to return to in-person learning. We appreciate the time you take to read and consider our concerns and look forward to thoughtful and concise written response to address the concerns brought up in our letter and by other members of our community.

Concerns:

- We are very concerned with how we are being asked to teach in-person. It is significantly different than how we typically teach. Many developmental and best practices that are required for successful instruction are not possible due to L&I safety requirements. Some of these practices include guided reading instruction at targeted instructional levels, age appropriate physical breaks with large movement, equity of access to visual aids, and collaboration between small groups of students. Currently each of these practices are being implemented in our remote learning model. Teaching a small class is not the same as teaching a small group.
- School is typically a warm and inviting environment. You often see high fives, fist bumps, hugs, and students gathered supporting one another. The school environment that students will experience in two short weeks will be sterile in comparison to what students are used to. Students who are experiencing sadness, separation anxiety (especially K students), or other strong feelings will not be able to be comforted by an adult other than words from six feet away. Due to masks they won't even receive a smile or empathetic expression. Who is preparing students for the differences in what they expect school to be and what the actuality is? What are the social and emotional repercussions of bringing students back to this highly restrict environment?
- Teachers routinely prepare specially designed instruction for students. This happens for all students – not only for students who receive supports through their IEP. Two and half hours (and some days less due to specialists' schedules, temperature checks, outdoor breaks) will not be long enough to provide specially designed instruction. There will not be time, or the ability due to COVID safety restrictions, to meet with individuals and small groups to provide specialized instruction. For students with IEPs how will we ensure they meet their IEP minutes given that so much of their day is asynchronous? No plan has been presented by BSD to meet students' IEP needs once in hybrid.

- We are concerned about the learning of students who will need to be quarantined due to COVID or COVID exposure. No plan has been presented to teachers about how we will teach those students.
- Shortage of subs. During a regular school year, we experience a shortage of subs regularly. Routinely teachers take other students into their classroom but with COVID we will not be able to combine classes. Our MLL, ITCL, counselors, and facilitators all have a full plate of work to do. Using them as substitutes is not equitable to their workload and is not fair to the students and staff they would have been serving. Prior to returning to in-person learning we need a clearly outlined plan about how subs will be used in our school and how needs will be met when teachers and other staff members need to be quarantined due to COVID or COVID exposure. We also need to re-evaluate the allowance for sick days this year. Being exposed to or getting COVID from a student in your class could take all your allotment of sick days for this calendar year. Being exposed or getting it a second time would result in unpaid days. If the staff member is only being exposed at school that sick time is directly related to carrying out their job and should given additional paid sick time.
- As educators we have received little information about what to focus on during our instructional time with students. In the remote setting we can touch upon most standards and topics, although to a less degree than in the classroom due to the length of time with students. Once we transition into hybrid the synchronous learning time will be significantly less. After specialist, temperature checks, and breaks we will have about 2 hours of instruction. That is not enough time to teach literacy (reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and listening), math, science, social studies, and SEL at our current levels of instruction. The district needs to provide information about what we are expected to teach, and the report cards need to be adjusted to represent those changes. During the regular school day we have just over 5 hours of time with students (including specialists), during our current remote learning we have 3 hours plus 20 – 30 minutes in a small group, and during the hybrid plan we will have 2 1/2 hours (including specialists some days and breathing breaks outside). This is significantly less and needs to be planned for. We cannot expect the same amount of learning from our students in less time.
- We have concerns about the number of people entering the classroom. GSAs, Paras, ITCLs, MLL teachers, and principals coming and going in and out of multiple classrooms each day increases the risk of COVID exposure. If/when we return to hybrid, please set limits around who is allowed in the classroom in order to limit exposure and cross-contamination between cohorts and to limit the number of contacts all adults in the building are exposed to.
- We are concerned about cohorts combining for after school childcare. What mitigations will be taken to limit cross-contamination of cohorts when students attend childcare in our own buildings?
- How was it concluded we were failing? We have consistently heard the message from BSD that we are failing to meet the needs of our students. As teachers we have not received any surveys from the district asking about the successes and shortfalls of our students. How was this conclusion made? Our students are showing success in several ways:
 - Our students are innovating. They are learning to use technology in ways they never have before. They have learned how to tilt their screen so teachers can observe their work, they have learned to take screen shots, turn in photos of their work, successfully manipulate multiple computer programs, and develop ways to manage time at home that prioritizes learning.
 - Students are growing academically. In a school board meeting earlier this year it was noted that surprisingly students were achieving more than expected based on their TRC and STAR tests.
 - Students are attending. Students are showing up and are actively engaged. They might be in their pajamas or might be finishing that last bite of breakfast, but they are attending.
 - Students are being challenged. We are presenting relevant and interesting material for our students that is challenging them. We meet in small groups and one-on-one to encourage even higher levels of understanding and in those groups meet students' needs for learning.

- Students are safe.
- There are some students that remote learning is not working for. A decision was made to prioritize their return to the building but as a district that decision has fallen flat, and the district has shifted to returning all K-2 students who have selected hybrid.
- The current plan for return to in-person learning is not safe and is inadequately providing a learning environment poised for success.
 - As of 1/11/21 King County is at 313/100k cases. The CDC indicates anything above 200/100k cases is high risk of transmission in communities and studies show the rates in schools are linked to prevalence in the communities. Due to our cases being in the high-risk range, it is unsafe to bring students into the building for in-person learning.
 - Testing. The district currently does not have a plan for testing students or staff. King County is consistently above the benchmark of testing results in 2 days. Bringing students back to school will increase exposure, thus increasing testing needs. Because our county is already struggling to keep up we will contribute to the number of people getting tested and needed to wait too long for results.
 - 87.2% of hospital beds in King County are occupied. Governor Inslee and medical professionals in our area have expressed concern over the lack of hospital beds.
 - The new variant is more infectious in children. Physicians, epidemiologists, and scientists recommend reconsidering in-person learning until educators and staff receive the vaccine.
 - WA does not collect or report virus data specific to schools. BSD has not released information on how cases and outbreaks will be reported to the community. Because it is not mandated it is impossible to accurately claim our contact tracing is valid or adequate.
 - Staff members are forced to return without being vaccinated. A large majority of our staff are not eligible until April at the earliest with the second shot being available in May. Very few of our staff members will be vaccinated before returning. Dr. Vin Gupta has said “teachers and support staff in schools should be fully vaccinated before they’re expected to return to in-person instruction. Doing otherwise is wrong and unjust to teachers nationwide.” Waiting until staff members are vaccinated will not only protect staff members but also our students and their families.
- We have concerns about how the plans to return to school were developed.
 - The plans were developed without us even though we are the ones most qualified to evaluate the merits of the model planned and proposed in BSD’s Back to Buildings plan.
 - No surveys or information gathering meetings were held to determine what is working, what is not working, and what needs to happen in order to successfully return to buildings.
 - Families have had little input in the plans that were developed.
- It will be increasingly difficult to fulfil students’ IEP needs.
 - Some students have had to change teachers/group of peers/schools. This results in the student having a new environment to get used to. Because there is no time for small groups it will take longer for teachers to get to know the new students and will stall their IEP goals they have been working on. It will take longer for students and teachers to develop the strong connections we have been relying on throughout remote learning.
 - Creating classes became arbitrary this year as well as how students were chosen to be placed in the AM and PM groups. Because students have less access other students, students with IEPs, as well as students with MLL services, will be more isolated both in class and while receiving services. They also have less exposure to peers that provide positive language and behavior models. This may limit the connections students are able to make with each other. These connections are directly tied to student well-being. For our students qualifying for IEPs these connections are even more essential. The current groupings do not take into consideration students’ needs for well-being or academics.

As educators, we request action on the following items:

- We oppose BSDs Back to Buildings Plan and call for phased reopening aligned with the prior metrics.
- We advocate to remain in the current safe remote learning model for most students.
- We advocate for the prioritized plans for students needing support based on teacher-provided data and efforts.
- We stand in solidarity with classified staff and colleagues providing in person services and would like a full review of the success of the services they are providing including but not limited to a survey of all involved staff members.
- Implement a testing protocol for students and staff.
- Develop a system for reporting cases and outbreaks to the community
- Develop messaging that clearly communicates to families their responsibility to follow state safety guidelines.
- Publicly advocate at the state level for educators to receive the vaccine as soon as possible.
- Make joint decisions with educators for in-person learning.
- Reach out to families of color in meaningful ways to learn about their experiences, concerns, and desires.
- Develop program specific plans to allow for virtual and hybrid (for example, dual language).
- Provide data for the conclusions that have been made that the plan for in-person is better than the current remote plan and that we are failing students.
- Prioritize learners with the greatest needs.
- Develop and communicate a clear plan that considers the safety for teachers and staff members that have to work in multiple classrooms.
- Develop a plan to minimize risk for students attending childcare within our buildings
- Develop a clear plan for a quality educational experience for students who will be excluded from their classrooms due to quarantine for extended time due to COVID related symptoms/exposure.
- Require students and staff to quarantine for 10 days before coming back to buildings after any travel.
- Communicate the in-person supports that will be available for students who experience COVID related anxiety at school.
- Develop and communicate a plan to provide adequate substitutes
- Develop and communicate with the community the plan for what will happen when students can't follow protocols.
- Communicate the plan for how many safety violations will be allowed before a class or school is required to go remote again.
- Communicate the long-term plan with staff (including classified). What is the timeframe for going back full day? What is the plan for lunches? Recess? Will classrooms allow for desks to be placed 6 feet apart?

As educators we strongly desire to be back in the classroom with our students and look forward to a time when it is safe enough to meet with students face to face and provide the in-person education that meets their needs for academic growth and social emotional well-being.

We look forward to a concise written response to the questions and concerns addressed in this letter.

Best Regards,

19 Staff Members of Medina Elementary