

January 11, 2021

Dear School Board Members,

We are a group of dedicated educators from Wilburton Elementary who are **extremely concerned about the plan to return K-2 students to buildings in January.**

Remote learning has been successful. We are proud of what BSD has provided so far: devices, internet, meals, and childcare. At Wilburton, we are equally as proud of the work we have accomplished this year with our students' best interests in mind: high quality instruction, small groups, one-on-one meetings, and data-driven support. Our student support teams are meeting with students and families, we have provided social groups for students, and individualized support plans. Many of our educators work late into the evenings and spend weekends planning, adding up to 60-70 hour work weeks for many. We have worked, and continue to work, tirelessly. We have seen the fruits of our labor as parents have given feedback on how much learning, engagement, and excitement there still is, even in the remote setting. Many students who ordinarily struggled with our traditional in-person model are now thriving. Why have we not been asked to share the many successes we have had?

As devoted educators, we are aware of the hardships many of our students are facing. We hear our students complain of loneliness and missing their peers. We are aware of the tension, arguments, and worse in some households. We understand the barriers to learning on a screen as opposed to learning next to their teachers. We miss our students dearly and desire to be with them in person - when it is safe. Despite the challenges, despite the hardships, our students are safe, emotionally regulated, and making academic progress. We plead with you: is it best for our students to return to school now? What are we trying to accomplish by rushing this return? Is it in line with our district's vision, mission and values?

Our equity and leadership teams have poured hours into creating plans to bring students back to the building on a needs based, case by case basis, which is already happening. We have seen great progress with our most marginalized students. Families are receiving food and hygiene items, as well as rental assistance and childcare when needed. We have been able to provide individualized instruction in a way we have never been able to before. It is quite concerning that these academic and social supports we have put in place for students will no longer be feasible in a hybrid model. Why not continue on this path?

Where is the data to support that in-person learning to all students (at this time during a pandemic) is better than what we are providing right now? Clearly there are pros and cons to both remote and in-person instruction. One pertinent reason for returning to school buildings (that has been offered), is to support our most marginalized students. However, we see in other districts across the country, the vast majority of families who choose to send their children back to buildings are white. (Please read the following article by the New York Times: [New York Schools Reopening Inequality](#)). Shouldn't the safety of our students, staff, and community be the continued priority?

When families selected the hybrid model this summer it was with the understanding of returning when cases were under 75/100k. Case numbers are currently at 281/100k. The guidelines changed in December so that K-2 could return to buildings no matter what the case numbers are. Families were given the choice to switch to remote learning but with the caveat that their child would have a new teacher, and possibly a new school. Relationships, routine, and consistency matter right now. Many families have chosen to stay hybrid not because they are ready to go back but because they don't want to lose their classroom teacher and groups of peers. Parents are begging to stay remote longer with the same teacher and return when the numbers are lower, as was stated in the summer. Students and families are anxious to return to buildings and rightfully so. This not only is a major change in routine, but also carries the weight of health risks, and potential for more disruptions to routines if there are subs or quarantine needed.

Many staff and students will experience intense anxiety by returning to buildings right now. As devoted educators who continually put our students' needs above our own and often our families, we are worried that students and staff will suffer emotionally by returning to school buildings when it is not safe. Teachers will be unable to safely assist students at a distance closer than 6 feet without risking their own lives and that of their family. Many educators live in multigenerational homes, have older parents caring for their children, or are high risk themselves. These concerns don't seem to even be acknowledged or addressed.

We have been lucky to have so few COVID cases in our district, but might that be because of the remote plan we have successfully implemented so far? As stated before, we see in countless districts across the country that students and staff are becoming ill with COVID. The new variant that has made its way into the United States is particularly concerning as children are more susceptible to contracting the virus. Is returning to school buildings worth the potential long-term health and safety risks of our school community?

Our requests:

1. Delay the start of broad in-person learning until case numbers are lower and/or staff have been vaccinated.
2. Have COVID tests provided upon request for staff and random testing of students and staff on an ongoing basis similar to New York Public Schools.
3. Clearly and specifically answer all staff questions regarding procedures, safety requirements, supervision logistics, and substitute scenarios before returning to buildings.
4. Have students and staff be required to quarantine for 10 days before coming back to buildings after traveling.
5. Provide a district-wide mandatory training as to how teachers and staff members can prioritize emotional and social well-being of their students.

6. Provide clear guidance as to how support staff are to do their jobs while maintaining safety protocols (e.g. paras, GSAs, counselors, MLL facilitators, psychologists, etc.) We have been receiving conflicting recommendations.

Our Questions:

1. What in-person supports will be available for students and staff members who experience COVID-related anxiety at school?
2. Who will cover classes if there is a substitute shortage? In normal years we combine classes to create 40+ students in one room or rotate in different adults every hour.
3. What will happen when students cannot or will not follow safety protocols? What will the procedure be?
4. Because we cannot enforce disclosure of travel, how will we be able to ensure that our students and staff are safe?
5. What is the plan for those students who are going to have to quarantine after travel or due to illness? What will be expected of teachers and students in this situation?
6. How many safety violations will be allowed before a class or a whole school is required to go remote again?
7. It has been stated that the half-day plan is only meant to be temporary. What is the plan for students eating lunch, snacks, and having recess? How will safety protocols be implemented in those scenarios?
8. Why are we being asked to return to in-person learning right now when we are not even eligible for the vaccine yet?

To reiterate, it is our sincere desire to be in schools with our students once again. We miss them dearly. However, it is in no one's best interest to return whole grade levels back to school buildings just yet. We give everything we can, and then some, to our students and their families. Forcing educators to return to school buildings in the height of a pandemic, does not align the core values of the district and the community we serve.

It is our hope that the district (including, but not limited to: Dr. Duran, School Board, Jeff Thomas, and Carrie Lang) will consider the aforementioned questions, worries, and requests, and will set aside time for a meeting with our school to address our concerns prior to January 20th, 2021.

Respectfully,

26 members of the Wilburton Elementary staff

