

June 29, 2020

TO: Representative Cheryl Youakim, Chairwoman of the Education Policy Committee  
Representative Jim Davnie, Chairman of the Education Finance Division Committee  
All Members of the Education Policy Committee  
All Members of the Education Finance Division Committee  
Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker, MN Dept of Education  
Governor Tim Walz

*Sent via email to [alyssa.fritz@house.mn](mailto:alyssa.fritz@house.mn)*

**SUBJECT: Written Testimony for distance learning hearing on June 30, 2020**

Dear Chairwoman Youakim & Chairman Davnie,

I'm writing as a School Board Member at ISD 108 – Central Public Schools in Norwood Young America, MN. I also have 4 children going into grades 6, 8, 10 & 12 for the 2020-21 school year. During the distance learning period last spring, I spoke to our school administrators several times requesting their feedback on how distance learning was going. Overall, there were many concerns if the students were progressing academically, concerns around at-risk children, concerns about special needs children, and concerns about the health & well-being of the students in our district. Therefore, I would classify the distant learning experiment as not favorable. While I understand why the decisions were made last spring, however, we now have more data about the COVID-19 virus, and I strongly feel this approach should not carry over into the next school year.

Here are some of the reasons why distance learning was not a good experience:

- 1) The current education structure is not set up for an effective online learning system. To no fault of their own, today's teachers are not equipped or well-trained to be effective virtual educators. Therefore, today's students are falling behind, and it's going to be challenging to get them caught-up if distance learning is to continue.
- 2) The teacher-student relationship was lacking during the distance learning time-period, and the kids were the ones who suffered from it. My kids missed their teachers, their friends, and their activities. The teachers at our schools are great role models, and our children were not able to have the same relationship with their teachers over a video.
- 3) The mental stress on our children was noticeable. Considering all of the news was scary, both parents were asked to work from home, all activities were cancelled, and school had to be done remotely, this created an environment where our kids felt isolated and alone. They were not received the proper support they were accustomed to from their teachers. It was challenging for them to ask questions and get timely responses if they didn't understand a lesson or assignment.
- 4) As parents had to work from home and having 4 children in the house needing devices to log-on for school, adequate technology was not available for everyone to meet their needs during the day.

As a School Board Member, I'd like to see schools open up as normal this fall. That means face-to-face learning in our schools. No hybrids and no distance learning. At bare minimum, give each school the flexibility to make decisions how to operate as one-size fits all approach to schools is not appropriate and it will not work. More and more data is becoming available on the impact of COVID-19 on certain population groups. While healthy school-aged children may get the virus, the risks of hospitalization or death is very rare. In our area, total COVID cases for all age-groups have been extremely low (11 as of June 28<sup>th</sup>).

Our kids need the social interaction with their friends and teachers. They need to get back to participating in their extra-curricular activities. Therefore, I'd like to things need to get back to normal as quickly as possible. I'm more concerned about the overall well-being of our children than I am of the COVID-19 virus. Children and the elderly have been the most impacted from the decisions made on COVID-19. However, I believe they cannot be treated the same because the risks associated in these age groups are not comparable. Open up schools – it's what's best for MN and best for the kids.

Thank you,  
Kyle Strickfaden  
School Board Member, ISD 108

Effects of the pandemic response and business shut downs are likely to affect the personal finances of families and individuals for several years to come, as people hope to recover from job loss, furloughs, etc.

As you may know, school districts literally depend on our operating levies to keep the schools open. For multiple districts, our ongoing operating levies are set to expire in the next year or two, and those districts will need to put out a referendum to get voter approval to simply retain the money that is essential. This is basic continuing levy funding, not even including any new additional operating, tech, or facility levies.

As you also know, school districts do NOT have the authority to levy without referendum approval, unlike cities, counties and the state.

I am extremely concerned that voters simply will not vote to approve even ongoing tax amounts, because of the serious negative impact the COVID situation will have had on their personal financial situation. This would be a disaster for school districts depending on this funding.

I do not know the solution. Perhaps at least for this to be part of the conversation, for the legislature to recognize that a real crisis may occur, if multiple districts across the state put out referenda for continuing funding, and those levies fail, and then schools are literally stripped of an untenable percentage their operating dollars.

Could there be some kind of crisis school operating fund set aside, or legislation drafted, to support and replace the extraordinary shortfall, if continuing levies fail across the state in the next year or two?

One would hope - maybe even expect - that families will see the obvious need and benefit to approve continuation of taxes being levied from them to just keep schools going as they are. But my fear is that, as families are still affected financially, they simply may feel unable to vote for tax withholdings that they believe they just cannot afford any more. As you may know, in some districts across Minnesota, levy approval margins are already pretty thin.

Yes, this is kind of a "doom and gloom" fear. It may never actually become real... the economy may come back with a roar, and then this fear will prove unfounded. I hope that will be the case. But since we do not even know yet what the future trajectory of the coronavirus itself may be, we also do not know what kind of measures may need to be repeated in terms of business closures, and so we don't know yet what the financial status of families will be. I am just suggesting we get this possibility into the conversation, so we are not caught off guard this November or next November as levy questions are put to the voters.

thank you,

Mike Boguszewski  
Chair, Board of Directors ISD 623 Roseville Area Schools

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Scott Sawatzky and I am the 5-12 principal at Lac qui Parle Valley, which is located between Appleton, Madison, and Milan. We sit in the west/central part of Minnesota and are made up of several rural communities. I am writing in response to an upcoming meeting that is occurring on Tuesday, June 30 regarding how schools will be delivering education starting this coming fall of 2020. We have had an extremely low incidence of COVID in this area from the very beginning, and it seems quite detrimental and unnecessary to continue the distance learning or other modified learning this coming fall. Many people are already out and about, pools open, kids with friends, summertime in progress in spite of all of the cancellations.

Distance learning is a burden on working families, especially those with younger children. I would be very concerned about gaps in education at this point if we continue with distance learning or a hybrid approach. This spring, I realized the value of having teachers working directly with students. Specifically at the 7-12 grade level, teachers specialize in content areas where many parents are unable to fill in the gaps. These parents are working full days, coming home to do necessary things at home (supper, laundry, bills, etc), and still need to find time to support their children. Considering what is normally packed into a school day, I have major concerns about this plan - what is being missed? Not to mention that it leaves children with a lot of instability in their daily routine. A lot of parents work, and are not able to readily be around to fill that time appropriately. I am extremely proud of our staff at LqPV for the job they did and the professionalism they exhibited. They made the best out of a very challenging situation. However, technology (which we are fortunate enough to have) cannot replace the face to face interactions and education that occur on site.

The model of rotating days between distance learning and in person learning seems to be quite chaotic, another means that I cannot see functioning at all for working families. Or even providing any stability or consistency for children. This is not anything I am interested in seeing.

I am also concerned for children whose safe haven is school. And the overall isolation of all the kids from their teachers and friends...I am concerned about detrimental long term mental health effects across the board.

Again, I ask that school reopen AS NORMAL in the fall. If it does not, I am fearful that we may lose students to homeschooling or even traveling across the border to a school in South Dakota.

I recognize the challenges that COVID is creating and I do not take this virus lightly. We want to protect our students, staff, families, etc. If you can't open schools as normal statewide, please leave it up to each individual district to decide what is best for them based on statistics, parent surveys, etc. Please do not issue a one size fits all approach for this. We function very differently out here in rural Minnesota than they do in the metro. In many ways, we have been practicing social distancing for years due to how spread out we are, without even thinking about it. At the very least, we hope that each district is able to use local control and decision making to determine what the best route is for educational delivery. Thank you for your consideration on this.