

Date of Hearing: Tuesday, January 12, 2021
To: Members of the Education Finance Committee
From: Youth Representative Kaycie Brookens
Affiliated Organization: Fairmont Jr/Sr High School, Grade 11
City of Residence: Fairmont, MN

Chair Davnie and members of the committee, my name is Kaycie Brookens and I am a Youth Representative for Congressional District 1 for the Minnesota Youth Council. I serve on the Health and Wellbeing subcommittee, and although this is my first year as a representative, I have been engaged within my community for a number of years. I am an 11th grade student from Fairmont Jr/Sr High School and it is my honor to be able to testify on the behalf of not only my fellow peers, but for students throughout my congressional district.

If you find yourself unfamiliar with the town of Fairmont, it is a rural town residing in district 23a, with a population of around 10,000, about ten miles north of the Iowa border. The pinpoint location of my hometown is not critical information, but what is, is the experience I have as a rural student within that town. The rural areas in which thousands of students throughout my district reside in each come with their own set of unique challenges. Especially in regards to distance learning.

It goes without saying that adapting to a distance learning model has been less than ideal for students, parents, and educators around the state of Minnesota. However, there are outstanding discrepancies in distance learning when it comes to students living in rural communities like mine.

When first making the transition to distance learning in March of last year, it was staggering to see the amount of technology discrepancies throughout my student body. As I observed the needs of my peers as I went from class to class, I was astounded by the amount of students that did not have adequate technology or resources to complete simple coursework at home. I quickly realized that this inaccessibility not only posed a large threat to distance learning, but even the standard in person learning model posed major challenges to students without quality technology or broadband at home.

Luckily, like many schools, my district relied on chromebooks within the classroom, and thus we were able to adapt to a one-on-one technology model, where every student regardless of family income, received a school chromebook to keep at home. Unfortunately, even with this model, students with no or poor broadband connection still face these discrepancies, an issue that still remains unresolved for thousands of students across the state.

Even without these discrepancies in technology, distance learning continues to be a major stressor for students of all backgrounds. Through experience on the Minnesota Youth Council, extracurricular activities, and day to day interactions with my classmates - one theme is unanimous throughout these times: We, as students, are exhausted.

Young people across the state, regardless of previous academic performance, are finding themselves unmotivated, and struggling to keep up with coursework. All too many students, myself included, feel a lack of stability and support through such trying times. The status quo when it comes to student support is simply not enough.

As you head into the legislative session, I simply ask that you have empathy and consideration for the health of students - mental, emotional, and physical, in your decision making process.

As I conclude my testimony, I would like to thank Chair Davnie and the Committee Administrator Sarah Burt for their continued support of youth voice, and for the provided space to testify today. Myself, and youth from all parts of Minnesota are grateful for your demonstrated efforts to ensure that no decision is made about us, without us. Thank you.