

We the Media

Communicating in Anxiety-Laden Times

I am an exhausted parent of two daughters, ages 2 and 5. Months of juggling work and home teaching have depleted my husband and me, and we are ready to see schools reopen. We wanted our eldest to start first grade with friends. In a school.

Fairfax County Public Schools began reopening planning in mid-June with a survey to parents and staff outlining three options: a virtual start to the school year (dependent on state reopening phases); a hybrid in-school, at-home learning model; and a 100 percent virtual model for students and teachers at high risk. They asked for our preferences and experiences with spring online learning. Days later, our superintendent presented a detailed plan to the local board. I was impressed by the thoroughness of the presentation, but I saw holes in the plan and wanted to retake the survey. I wasn't alone.

Two town halls and another school board work session later, the revised plan was presented: Families could opt for two days a week in school, with asynchronous learning at home for three, or for 100 percent virtual synchronous learning. The district asked families to commit for the full year—a hard ask. Not surprisingly, these options met with resistance and questions.

What safety precautions would schools be taking? How would a school manage a COVID outbreak or regular illness? How would the models be implemented? Would children be able to continue immersion, IB, AP? Safety aside, which learning model is best? And what about accommodations for special education? The answers to these and other questions were, “We don't know. We need families' preferences first.”

How frustrating. We wanted to make informed decisions, yet district and school leaders could not help. We turned to friends and family, whose advice may not have been accurate (tip: never underestimate the power of social media in swaying opinion). Many parents nationwide faced similar chicken-or-egg scenarios: Parents need good information to make confident choices; districts need to know parents' intent in order to plan. This mutual dependency left parents to take leaps of faith.

Our ultimate decision came down to safety. And apparently, so did our school district's. Only a week after we submitted our preference to keep our daughter home, our superintendent and school board reversed course and are starting the school year virtually for everyone. A wise choice, I think, but I wish I could get back those sleepless nights spent agonizing over our decision!

It will take a village to pull this off. Parents will need supports to supplement learning at home and help their children safely socialize. We will need continued flexibility from our jobs and child care. I especially hope schools leverage community resources to fill gaps for so many struggling families.

In the face of shifting, sometimes conflicting guidance, reopening schools is easier said than done. For communicating in uncertain times, my advice is this: Manage change with authority. State boards should make every effort to involve stakeholders early in planning. Be transparent when the information that undergirds the plan changes, and point stakeholders to trustworthy sources so they can make the best decisions possible. ■



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