

Testimony of Jennifer Dale, Parent from Lake Oswego, Oregon
United States House of Representatives
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing
“Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post-COVID-19”
Thursday, March 25, 2021, at 1:00 p.m. (EDT)

Good afternoon, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing, **“Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post-COVID-19.”**

I appreciate the work you are doing to evaluate the needs of our children and the impacts of prolonged school closures on their education and educational equity.

I am the proud and grateful mom to three school-aged children. My oldest daughter Maddi is in 7th grade and became a teenager this past February. My youngest child is Charlie. He is 8 years old and in the 2nd grade.

My middle daughter is Lizzie, age 9, in the third grade, and Lizzie has Down syndrome. I want to focus most of my testimony today on Lizzie. She is a hidden victim of pandemic policies and prolonged school closures.

Because of Lizzie and other students like her, I believe schools provide essential services to our communities and should have reopened in the Fall of 2020.

The pandemic-related shutdown of schools, co-curricular activities and youth sports caused disruptions and destabilization for our children, many of whom could bear it the very least. Whether it was their intended purpose or not, America’s public schools form the basis of our communities and deliver services and experiences that cannot be obtained anywhere else.

For my daughter, school is where she participates in P.E. and recess. It is where she receives essential therapies, including speech and occupational therapy. School is also where Lizzie spends time with friends, forming the community bonds that lead to long-term relationships and ultimately job opportunities.

In her IEP, or Individualized Education Program, Lizzie’s learning specialist describes her as:

“A 3rd grade student with a big heart, a great sense of humor, who enjoys playing with her friends. She is a **loyal** friend who stands up for peers when they have been wronged or hurt. Lizzie loves to laugh and giggle. She participates in soccer and dance. She can be a fierce competitor when it comes to sports.”

In a typical year, Lizzie spends more than 80 percent of her day in the general education classroom. It is a seat she has fought hard to win and keep.

She rides our neighborhood school bus; she is greeted by friends at school who walk with her to class; she hangs her backpack and makes a lunch selection. Over the years, being included in the classroom has enabled Lizzie to learn key routines and build a community for which she is part of the essential fabric. For whom she is **loyal**.

In a typical year, an educational aide supports Lizzie's general education, modifying her classwork and helping her develop reading and writing skills with hands-on supports.

But 2020 was not a typical year.

Oregon's governor rightfully shuttered school buildings in March when we knew very little about COVID-19. But then the governor's mandate kept schools closed under metrics so hard to meet that the only path to reopen would be changing the metrics themselves rather than meeting them.

Unfortunately, once schools closed, Lizzie's entire existence seemed to vanish from sight. No one could see her but me, her father and her siblings. No one could benefit from that fierce soccer competitor or that friend who brought you a band-aid when you were hurt. No one could see Lizzie.

When distance learning started in September, we were provided a Chromebook, several Zoom links and a login for Google classroom. Like her peers, Lizzie was supposed to receive all instruction online.

But unlike her peers, we quickly discovered that Lizzie's cognitive delays made online learning impossible. She is still learning site words, learning to type on a keyboard, and learning to use a mouse.

The online platform didn't work to teach her to grip a pencil or correct her answers on a math worksheet. She was confused why the teacher could not hear her or why her peers did not wave hello to her.

To help at home in the absence of an aide, we hired a nanny so that I could continue working as a CPA and my husband in his law practice. But it took three of us to support 2.5 hours of daily Zoom learning. I remember mornings where I had Lizzie on my lap with my arms wrapped tight around her stomach just to keep her from running away. Our nanny sat beside me and my husband by the door. Most mornings I was in tears, and so was Lizzie.

Lizzie's frustrations maxed out quickly.

By the third week, Lizzie threw the Chromebook away without us knowing and asked for "far away school with her friends," as she called in-person learning. For the last seven months, Lizzie has not been part of the general education classroom we fought so hard for since kindergarten. She stopped attending general education classes entirely.

We sent video clips to the principal, the superintendent and school board members. They said their hands were tied. But we pushed and pried open the doors in mid-October. Lizzie was the first student in our district (and the entire metro area) to return to something called "limited in-person" by the Oregon Department of Education.

But it was very limited. No teachers. No therapies. No friends. Just two hours, two times per week.

This was back in early October and I was beginning to wonder how other families were doing it. I posted my concerns online, sharing this post on Facebook:

"I'm ready to tell anyone who will listen that it's time to go back to school, in-person. This was a heroic effort by our schools, administrators and teachers, but families are not OK.

Kids are not OK in this model.... at the very least, our most vulnerable and our youngest kids need to be back in school. It's time to begin learning to live with Covid as we have at grocery stores, restaurants, and more. We can't hide forever."

That post formed the beginning of Oregon's grassroots back-to-school efforts and the launch of numerous local advocacy groups. We have held almost weekly rallies, hosted Zoom town halls, and initiated massive email campaigns to share research and science on safe reopening with school board members, superintendents and lawmakers. We found that it was very difficult to get anyone to listen and work with us to reopen schools. Somehow, it was no one's fault and everyone's fault. And kids were being harmed while adults debated what to do.

For one year, Lizzie has been denied all physical, occupational, and speech therapies provided under her legal IEP because services are telehealth only, even now after all educators were prioritized for the vaccine. She has been denied services mandated by her IEP.

She has lost every single friendship we built from kindergarten because there are no classrooms with peers and no sports or extracurricular activities. A once vibrant life full of dancing on stages, scoring goals in soccer, and friends who helped her open her lunchbox, gone.

The importance of in-person, general education classrooms in my daughter's life could not be more critical.

- In a classroom, Lizzie joins reading groups where students take turns reading to her and she reads to them.
- In a classroom, Lizzie's aide monitors whether she needs a quick walk-about to reset her overwhelmed thinking.
- In a classroom, Lizzie's friends stay alert to when she needs help cutting a piece of paper.
- In a classroom, Lizzie's teacher provides specialized seating so that she can stay on task.

Maybe this is a temporary experience and hardship for some but not for Lizzie. This week, we completed the paperwork to hold Lizzie back in the third grade; she will be forced to make all new friends.

Therefore, even as schools begin reopening, it does not mean things are returning to "normal" for our family, or many others. In fact, the *prolonged closure of public schools* has dramatically changed just about every aspect of our lives, especially for my kids. Even after a year of people telling parents: don't worry kids are resilient, or all kids will be behind – the truth is everyone had to figure out for themselves how to solve this problem.

My oldest now attends a private Christian school from 8am to 3pm; my son now goes to an independent private school from 8am to noon each day; and Lizzie attends 8 to 10:45 then again 2 to 2:30pm for specialized instruction. My most vulnerable learner is still receiving the least amount of instruction.

The harms that have occurred due to the prolonged closures of public schools have fallen hardest on our most vulnerable children. School closures have divided communities and families. In closing, I wanted to share something that Lizzie asked us last week at morning drop off: "Please ask my brother, Charlie, to come back to my school with me." She wants her siblings, her friends and her community to come back together, and I think we all want to figure out how to do this in a way that serves our most vulnerable children.