

K-12 Education Budget Committee
Chairwoman Kristey Williams, 546-South
Written testimony on information concerning remote, hybrid, and in-person learning

My name is Kate Doerksen, Board of Education President USD 266 in Maize, Kansas.
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Date of Hearing: Feb. 3, 2021

To Chairwoman Williams and K-12 Education Budget Committee Members:

I have been a Maize Board of Education member for more than five years. We have enjoyed a healthy functioning school board in this district for most of those years, passing two large bond projects and addressing boundary issues, among other things. Then the COVID pandemic hit, and addressing what is in the best interests of our students and how best to educate our children during this pandemic has literally ripped our school board as well as our community apart. Not having clear guardrails around what to do across the state as a single body has allowed districts to make their own decisions school-by-school, creating an environment in which we are making decisions based on what another district is doing and not in our students' and staff members' best interests. It has created an environment in which the loudest group with the biggest social media presence gains influence and persuasion at a time when science and data should speak the loudest and be most influential. Our school board members and some administrators have received hate mail, vandalism, and other impacts to their private businesses and lives because of this.

Our district has experienced multiple learning models during the course of this pandemic because of the fluctuating community spread of the virus and the emerging science. We started in Spring 2020 in full-time remote teaching and learning when we knew very little about the spread of the virus and we needed time to organize how to best instruct our students online. Then we spent the summer months with a group of more than 100 staff members designing learning models that could be used in Fall 2020. We engaged medical professionals who volunteered their time to help us understand pandemic science. We purchased lots of personal protective equipment, sanitizer, and masks and designed socially distanced schools. We started Fall in a hybrid model in order to cut the school population in half to ensure social distancing and safety of our students and staff members. We offered full-time remote teaching and learning to those families who were afraid and/or hesitant to come into buildings for legitimate reasons (immunocompromised, elderly family members, etc). We brought elementary students back full-time, went fully remote around the winter break and back into hybrid in January. Our administrators, teachers, and families are tired of the ever-changing landscape of education.

As the nation argued about the validity of COVID and the numbers and impact, so too did our school district. A growing group of parents also grew tired of what they deemed as subpar education and insisted their children come back to school 5 days per week, "just like other districts." The science, the community spread, and our medical advisors advised against that, but science and community were thrown out the window and replaced with frustration and insults. School board members must face significant pressure from their constituents.

I also take issue with the state's insistence that state assessment tests be mandatory this year. To demand that our students, in this pandemic time of various learning models and anxiety, take a standardized test that may not adequately measure their success and rate of learning this year is disappointing. This requirement appears to be an attempt by some to seek false evidence that public schools are ineffective and/or falling short. The truth is that our teachers and staff members are working more hours and harder than ever during a year that looks like no other.

We know our families and students have suffered greatly during this pandemic, and we know people are experiencing COVID fatigue. Legislators could have done a better job of supporting schools during this pandemic by setting up gating criteria that was mandatory to follow for every district so the playing field was equal. I also believe since the largest part of our state budget is for education, indicating it is the state's priority to educate children, school staff members should have been in group 1A to be vaccinated so we could get our students back in the classroom as soon as possibly safe for all. You should have supported that, and you should still be advocating for that now.

It is not too late to help. We need your support both financially and legislatively to help our students get back into the classroom. Send out standard scientific directives on what schools must meet to bring students back in full-time, advocate for vaccinations for our school staff members as a priority, and set aside money for mental health and school programs so we can help our students catch up when they do come back. Don't leave all the decision-making to a group of volunteer community leaders sitting in a boardroom who may or may not have any background in educating children.

Thank you for your service in the Kansas Legislature, and if there is anything I can do for you or to help you better understand our situation, please let me know. I am happy to discuss our situation with anyone who will listen. In addition to being a proud school board member, I am also a scientist who does understand pandemic science and data.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Catherine M. Doerksen".

Kate Doerksen
Maize USD 266 Board of Education President