

House Education Committee Testimony

My name is Jessica Settles and I am the 7th and 8th grade English teacher at Danville School in Danville, Vermont. I have been teaching for 8 years. Thank you for allowing me to share my experiences as a teacher since the onset of this pandemic. Prior to the Governor's announcement of schools closing down, my 7th and 8th-grade students and I had been working hard finishing up research papers and preparing for end of unit discussions that would take place in my class on the following Monday, the 16th. Like all other schools in the state, on the evening of Sunday, March 15th, we got the word that we would have to close our doors by that coming Wednesday. As soon as I heard the announcement, I quickly switched my plans for that next day and started planning and creating work for students to do outside of school. That night I remember feeling so uncertain about what the next day would hold, what I would say to my students, or what the academic expectations would be for them and for me as their teacher in the coming weeks. Because attendance was not required on Monday or Tuesday in Vermont schools, only 16 out of 50 middle school students came in on Monday and only 6 came in on Tuesday, mainly to get their work and materials. We spent those days talking and checking in and discussing the work that they would be doing while they were home. We made sure students that were there had computers and chargers to go home with as well as materials for each one of their classes. At the same time, we put together bags of computers and materials for students that were not there for parents to pick up. On Tuesday, I even made a few drop-offs of belongings and materials to students and staff houses who were not able to make it to school. Deliverywoman is not a hat I've worn as a teacher before this day. Monday and Tuesday felt like a whirlwind. Between creating last-minute assignments, comforting students, providing students with materials, and making deliveries, I also helped a few students with work that couldn't be done independently due to learning disabilities and lack of access to resources at home. At the end of the day Tuesday, we said goodbye to our students for the last time and were told to sanitize all of our desks and chairs and pack up our classrooms for cleaning. We were also told that we could come to help on Wednesday if we were willing and able and otherwise, it was expected that teachers would be checking in with students and families online and beginning to plan for online learning, even though it wasn't quite defined yet. Because I have no children of my own, and I am healthy and not in any of the risk categories, I volunteered to help that next day. That morning, teachers, paraeducators, administrators, custodial staff, kitchen staff, and even a school board member joined in the cafeteria to discuss the plan. Our main objectives were to clean, sanitize and lock up the school, and to figure out a system for feeding the families that relied on the school for food. I joined the cleaning efforts with a few of my coworkers and helped to sanitize many elementary classrooms, cubbies, and lockers in the hallway, the music room, auditorium, and more. In the span of 2 days, the

volunteers managed to successfully clean and lock up the building as well as create a system for distributing breakfast and lunch to families. Our school did an amazing job figuring out these essential functional tasks in a very limited time span. Since then, I have been at home trying to figure out my role as a teacher from afar. This past week or so has been filled with answering student and parent emails and providing feedback on their writing online. My team and I have created an online office hours schedule where we are available for video chatting with students who need help with work. So far, my most populated day online has been 9 out of my 50 students. Due to internet access issues, we have so far been unable to find a way to require students to come to these online office hours meetings. It doesn't seem likely that we could get all students to sign on for an actual class. During office hours, I've been checking in with students about how they've been doing as well as conferencing with them about their ELA work. We've been talking about the books we've been reading too. After we do all that, we've been playing online review games like Kahoot for ELA to ease their boredom and isolation. It has been really nice to see their faces again and to be able to laugh and have some fun with those that can attend. I think being able to connect with my students online has been helpful for me and my students and our time together is enjoyable. I am amazed at how quickly teachers and the students (the ones that are able to get online) are adjusting to online learning and trying new things despite the challenges. However, I am having a lot of trouble seeing this go longterm. Despite small victories here and there, my biggest concern about diving into online learning for my students is access to the internet, and the time, space, and resources it takes to learn remotely. Many of the students I meet with online have internet that cuts in and out and I often have trouble hearing them. Other students have no access to the internet at all. I also have other students who are vying for the same internet with parents and siblings. Even more, I have students who care for their younger siblings and do not have the time to complete all their work at home. I also have heard new rules that we are not allowed to talk with students under 13 unless their parents are home and not at work. So, I'm feeling a bit stuck and like I'm not sure how to hold all of my students accountable for their work when there are so many obstacles in our way. My other major concern is for the students that receive supports and services. I am puzzled as to how these supports and services can be delivered using online resources. I have one student on an IEP that relies on his mother's hot spot on her phone to get onto the internet. He does not always have access to the cell phone. It makes it very hard to support students when they do not have internet access or tools or resources to communicate and get the help they need. These obstacles will need to be removed for students in the more rural areas of Vermont to fully benefit from remote teaching and learning once we move from maintenance instruction to new learning. I know I've presented a lot of questions and dilemmas that are not easy to answer and we're all truly building the ship as we sail it. I

hope my experience as a teacher shows some insight into the uncertainty of our schools at this time and the fate of online learning. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony.