

House Committee on Education Remarks

Erica McLaughlin

Principal of Randolph Elementary School

Without a doubt the past 11 months in a school looked drastically different from anything we've ever seen before. Last year we wrote to our community that "our elementary schools continue to engage in a process of maximizing the opportunities to learn for all students," which is what we have been driven to do this year. The only difference is that we've had to do things *very* differently. The disruption that came to our lives as a result of the pandemic brought the uncertainty and fear of change, as well as the opportunity for collaboration and creativity to our schools. This year has reminded us that our schools are a vital part of the academic, social, and economic webs that unite and strengthen all our communities.

In the Orange Southwest School district where I have the privilege of working, the elementary schools function as a team. During this crisis, that team effort was never more needed or appreciated as we learned together, supported each other, celebrated our successes together and even grieved together. It has been a sad, hard time for everyone and our efforts to work together paid dividends. We were forced to reinvent all systems and routines in our schools, from selecting teachers to teach our remote learners to accommodate family and teacher requests, adjusting how we taught our students, where they ate lunch, where they engaged in learning their unified arts classes such as: Art, Music, Library and Physical Education, how students arrived each morning and how they were dismissed each afternoon. We even had to think about movement patterns regarding how students and staff moved around in the building to maximize safety measures. All this and more, was no small feat AND this was the case for every school in our state.

We have learned a number of lessons while other ideas were reinforced through this pandemic. Our staff and students are resilient and can adjust effectively and efficiently in a crisis situation. Teachers across our state spent an inordinate amount of time last spring, summer and fall learning innovative ways to teach children in remote settings and with a few days notice switch their teaching to in-person in order to keep our students, families and communities safe. Our students learned how to better use technology as a learning tool no matter what the content. They are often seen teaching family members at home how to access the school's learning hub to see their assignments and join school meetings through Google Meets or Zoom. Education has never turned on a dime like it did for the benefit of our children these last 11 months.

We learned that all of our students thrived with smaller class sizes, particularly students that have a lot of stress in their lives. Those students had much more one on one time with their teachers, were more relaxed and demonstrated a greater ability to focus on learning and connect with peers in healthy ways. Trauma specialist, Dr. Bruce Perry would tell you relational density matters and

that was evident in a positive way in our classes with fewer students during our hybrid learning sessions. Smaller class sizes contributed to our children being better emotionally regulated, so they were more available to access their learning when they were able to be in school.

We learned that the professional development we engaged in, in our district around trauma informed practices was critical during this traumatic time. It was imperative we put into practice what we learned about the impacts of ongoing toxic stress and what it does to our students' ability to learn AND what it does to a workforce that is experiencing this intense stress as well.

We learned that our youngest students can navigate technology tools to practice taught concepts in ways we had not explored before. Teachers learned how to effectively use new tech tools and video record concepts for students to learn and review lessons. We learned some students do better with remote learning with fewer distractions and fewer transitions, while others desperately needed in-person instruction with their teacher and peers to thrive.

We learned remote meetings can be effective for including staff from across the district to collaborate and our singleton teachers in our small schools did not need to go this journey alone. Teachers across schools are meeting weekly, planning together, reviewing student data together and participating in professional development together. In the OSSD we learned a long time ago doing this work together is better than going it alone.

While to this point I have shared many of the successes in this crisis, we have experienced many challenges, all of which I cannot share in the short amount of time we have together. At the forefront of our challenges are the great inequalities we see. We still have families without the internet. Students home alone that do not have family there to support their distance learning or to provide for their emotional needs. Supporting these students during this crisis has been one of our biggest issues.

Schools are faced with significant budget challenges for the remainder of this year and perhaps for years to come due to the spending that was needed, during this unforeseen crisis, to open our schools and to keep us all safe. We had to purchase PPE and disinfecting supplies and additional furniture in order to distance our students, all of which were unbudgeted necessities. I find myself wondering whether we will have an accurate accounting of the impact the Coronavirus has had on local budgets and what the tax burdens to our communities will be? Will it be clear to our communities that these hardships will be felt by the state as a whole, not just their own individual districts? Will it be clear that tax increases are not because schools were not being fiscally responsible? That is often the rhetoric we hear.

With requirements for quarantining and waiting for test results, schools are faced with not having enough staff on a day to day basis and the shortage of available substitutes has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Schools are faced with feeding our children and providing mental health supports for them and their families. Schools are faced with staff that worry they are going to get their students ill, become ill themselves or even bring COVID home to their loved ones. Our teachers signed up to inspire and educate the youth of our communities. I would add, they did so in incredible ways! They did not sign up to go to work to put their lives at risk by being frontline essential workers, but that is where they are each and every day. It is irresponsible to expect educators to work in a congregate setting without providing them with all available protections. The governor has made it a priority to get students back to in-person learning as soon as possible and should make it a priority to make sure that educators receive the vaccine with the same expeditious timeline. While schools are given guidance on safety measures, putting them into practice is a whole other matter. I challenge anyone to keep 6 year olds 3 feet away from each other or their teacher for that matter. It just is not possible on a consistent basis. It is not uncommon to see a child melt on their teacher's lap or to see a child show their gratitude with an enthusiastic hug to the adult that just helped them through a struggle. So I implore you to insist that school staff be given priority to receive the vaccine.

Schools are faced with ambiguous and ever changing guidelines, announcements at press conferences that require action by the schools without previous notice along with push back from state and local unions regarding that guidance. A rock and a hard place does not begin to describe what it feels like much of the time.

Schools are faced with shouldering the need to stay open to ensure workers can work in order to keep our economy going. Schools have students that are depressed, anxious or stressed on a normal basis. The pandemic has compounded these issues due to the difficulties families face while struggling to work, pay their bills, and support their children's education. Social isolation has brought about an increase in domestic violence and addiction. We provide a safe haven for children, a place where they can socialize with other children and be educated. Schools shoulder the needs of our communities and often without gratitude.

Despite all those challenges we are driven to serve our communities and in the end we will be stronger for this.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Erica McLaughlin