

Dear Education Chair and Committee,

First, I want to thank you for taking the time to read my input. My wife and I chose to live in Gardner, Kansas partly because we had heard about the phenomenal schools that the town had. I would like to say we have not been disappointed by that choice and until this year could have. However, my two oldest children stepped out of their middle school buildings on March 12, 2020 excited for spring break and 334 days later, they finally stepped foot back in school on February 9, 2021 with the start of hybrid learning. Currently they have had just 3 in person days of instruction.

To say this experience with remote/hybrid learning has been the beneficial education we want for our children would be a lie. I am an A & P mechanic, and am unable to be home to support my boys. As I mentioned my wife is an elementary school teacher. Elementary has been in-person full time since September. My wife is unable to be home with our boys. Financially it is not feasible for one of us to leave our job. We were thankful that in December my wife was able to take FFCRA extended leave to support the boys, however, once made optional the district chose not to offer it to employees so in January she returned to work and my 11 and 13 year old returned to managing their educational days alone.

This adult responsibility placed upon young children's shoulders has not gone well. In October, my 11 year old sat multiple times waiting to be let into a zoom session by his speech therapist. Thankfully he let us know and when we reached out to the teacher, her email bounced back to us as undeliverable. After emails to the principal and the special education coordinator we learned the teacher was no longer with the district. No one informed us. What they did allow to happen was an 11 year old, home alone, got to experience anxiety and stress that they were somehow making an error, while in reality they were forgotten by the district whose job it is to provide that quality service to them. It seems that is what has truly happened this year. We have forgotten our educational priorities: the children. The word resilient has been used to describe these children, with little to no care for the costs this trauma (as that is what they are surviving) will have or already has had.

My wife chose to take the leave in December because we had begun to see some mental health signs our boys were exhibiting. Our oldest even mentioned that he had "no drive to do anything." Months of adult responsibility had taken their toll. Our happy healthy boys who used to love to learn and had never exhibited any mental health issues, now have dealt with depression, anxiety, and apathy toward education. While home in December my wife observed that our 13 year old is literally on the computer all day. That is over 6 hours of screen time just for instruction, not including homework. The American Pediatrics Association recommends limiting screen time, in remote learning this is not possible. Screen fatigue is a real thing. She also observed that our 11 year old had huge blocks of time completely open. Since he is high academically, he is not receiving any instruction, not even enrichment, during small group reading, small group math, or tier blocks. Our boys are home together but essentially alone. Their schedules do not overlap and they even eat lunch in solitude. Just having my wife there for a month we saw a huge improvement in our boys with the social interactions they were able to have. Our oldest no longer had to be the adult and help the youngest with technology issues and other stressors, and the youngest had someone to interact with during all of his free time.

These kids who have to be home all alone have been forgotten. As a parent we feel completely helpless to truly support our children during this time. They are not adults. They do not have the executive functioning skills of adults, yet our district expects them to do so without any thought to the mental

health implications. What happened to the #ZeroReasonsWhy campaign? We have watched friends pull their kids and move them to private schools. We have seen teachers who work in Gardner but live in another district pull their kids to their own district. We have seen more affluent friends rent houses and live in another town so their child can be appropriately educated. We do not have those options financially. We are stuck in a district that refuses to appropriately educate our middle school children.

We need your help. Our children and many others need your help. These children are the future. Our district has treated that future with contempt this year through its decisions. I implore you to begin to meet the needs of these children, both emotionally and academically and help them to get back into school full time.

Sincerely,
Justin Reimer
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