



# DECREASING the DISTANCE

A SAN FRANCISCO PARENT COLLECTIVE

***The wellbeing of our children must stay at the center of all discussions about returning to in-person learning, improving distance learning, and providing safe spaces for young people to thrive. We asked parents how they are doing -- this is a sample of the stories that poured in on February 2, 2021 in just five hours.***

Handwriting was always a struggle for my 3rd grader, but my son forgot how to write his letters and do addition/subtraction within 20 over the course of 6 months of distance learning. He had an IEP but got almost no help through distance learning, and what help was provided was woefully inadequate. I eventually pulled him out and put him in a private outdoor school, which requires us to drive an extra 40 minutes a day during my workday. He no longer cries every day, or spends all day surfing the internet on YouTube rather than doing work.

-----

My daughters are struggling with loneliness and motivation. Both of them were energetic, eager students and both struggle to care about school. My oldest especially is having a hard time with the social isolation and is retreating into herself more and more. I'm worried that she won't go back to in-person school next fall because she will be in middle school.

-----

My son is in 2nd grade at SFUSD. He is sad when his younger brother leaves the house to attend preschool with his friends. At the beginning of this ordeal at the end of 1st grade, we all struggled to figure out a routine. The start of 2nd grade was better, as teachers had more clarity of what was expected of them regarding instruction time and assignments. We managed to get into some sort of routine Aug - Oct. By November, things changed for our son. He became completely disinterested, discovered how to watch YouTube videos while his teacher (who is brilliant, by the way) was giving instruction, and has been dis-engaged since then.

We are at the breaking point. Our 3rd and 2nd graders are completely disinterested in school and refuse to do their work. As parents, our work days have now doubled in terms of hours. I shift as much as I can to the evenings after the kids go to bed. This is completely unsustainable.

-----

First grader who LOVED kindergarten, loved school and learning, now despises school and exhibits dangerous levels of anger daily, out of control tantrums, including scary threats to run away. She cries from loneliness and is developing a sleep disorder. 3rd grader is being treated for high anxiety, something that only appeared since distance learning began and has developed regular migraines.

Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

-----  
  
My kindergartener has been lonely and angry. He says he's tired all the time. He says he has no friends. He turns off Zoom when he doesn't like what he sees or hears. He forgot how to work with others or cope with conflict. He doesn't understand why he sees kids walking to their private schools or why his sibling is going to daycare every morning, but he's not allowed to go to school. He used to love school, love being the teacher's pet, was friends with everyone in class. Now he just wants to lay on the couch all day.

-----  
  
Increased anxiety, insomnia, social isolation, more screen time, less physical activity, poor academic performance. I was laid off in March and have been unable to look for work since then because of having the kids home 24/7.

-----  
  
My child thrives in social environments, and isolation is very hard on him. I am a single mom, and not having school has caused an enormous strain on my budget and time management.

-----  
  
It destroyed us. Our son is an only child, and became more and more defiant and depressed. His social well-being hit rock bottom. He has special needs, and an IEP for extra support. Because of his ADHD someone had to be on his side constantly during Zoom or he would not pay any attention. It ruined my relationship with my son and our son was tired, but growing accustomed to online school = yelling and frustration. I could not focus on work for more than 1/2 hour pockets of time, and was failing in my job too.

-----  
  
My older child has been in remote school for almost a year, compared to my younger child who was able to return to in-person preschool in June 2020. The difference is noteworthy. My older child is isolated and withdrawn, my younger child is cheerful and hopeful. My older child detests remote school, my younger child looks forward to her school days. My older child barely maintains her learning, while my younger child is learning to write. Also, my older child struggles with attention issues; her ability to do so has deteriorated so that I sit with her to do her independent assignments.

-----  
  
I am a physical therapist working with patients who are rehabilitating from catastrophic neurological injuries (stroke, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injuries, etc). I cannot work from home and have been working since the pandemic began last March. We own a small business in San Francisco that has closed and reopened several times over the past year due to stay at home orders. My fourth grade son does distance learning at our family business, while my

Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

husband tries to keep us afloat with the business that he has spent his life building. My fourth grader was an engaged, dynamic, fun loving, kind and passionate learner. Initially, he did well and stayed engaged in distance learning, but over the past six months he has become withdrawn, unmotivated and has lost ground with his reading and writing skills. He is angry, sad, a different child really, with nothing to look forward to (his words).

I spend at least 1-2 hours at night helping my child learn concepts that were taught by his teachers over zoom, but I am failing and he is being left behind. We have no family in the area and my father passed away suddenly last month. We desperately need support for our children.

My older son is in sixth grade and is suffering with emotional isolation and loss. Most of his classmates don't attend zoom classes, or keep videos off when they are there. It is heartbreaking to see many kids leaving for private schools, moving away. Our family does not have the choice to work from home, and we are sinking. Science says it is safe for schools to open with precautions, and as a City we are failing the most vulnerable in our society. I love San Francisco, but this pandemic has revealed a very sad set of priorities.

-----

Our daughter's preschool closed last March with SIP. Within a few weeks of SIP, she developed a pronounced motor tic. She spastically shakes her body and it looks like she's having an epileptic seizure (but she's not! she's totally aware of the whole thing and isn't in pain or anything). We consulted with the pediatrician and her preschool teachers, who all concurred that this was stress/anxiety related to school closure. The tic has continued, although it lessened a bit once we got her in a daily pod with some other kids.

My child worries A LOT and it's now presenting in an additional way as stomach pains/cramps. This, too, we had diagnosed by her doctor because who knows, it could have been appendicitis or IBS... But the doctor's opinion is that it's related to her anxiety and worries. While she's doing fine academically, our child is often extremely anxious and stressed about daily things like getting dressed, going outside, and that her friends are doing OK because they have money while she has been "left at home".

-----

Our child loves her teacher. Absolutely adores her. She sends her teacher extra Seesaws with notes and messages embedded, hearts, rainbows, you name it. Connections are being made during distance learning, but these screen-facing moments aren't enough to make up for the constant isolation and loneliness that our child is feeling.

-----

Both myself and my child's mental health have taken a huge hit. She is very outgoing, energetic and social. Without being able to see other people and interact with her peers, she has become angry and disengaged. Watching her suffer, feeling helpless, and dealing with her wrath and left me feeling broken and depressed. I am an hourly worker, and have not been able to work nearly the number of hours I did pre-pandemic because many days, she only has one hour of zoom. I feel daily that I must choose between trying to keep my child happy, and earning money. Since my earnings are down, I can only afford the mental healthcare for one of us, and have prioritized my child as her behavior became increasingly alarming, by starting her in therapy, while I continue to struggle to hold it together every single day.

Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

-----  
My highschooler is depressed, she's not learning what she needs to in order to excel in life, college and for SATs. She sits in bed on zoom, she's one of the only participating students. She's sitting in on board meetings w/ SFUSD, working w/ Mission teachers on how to 'teach better online'. I am stressed trying to juggle work/school/momming it's NON STOP. Our children are falling behind.

My son is one of THOUSANDS of San Francisco children being denied a basic human right to a quality education. I truly believe this, as I have watched governments in my home countries of Canada and the UK return to school without hesitation during this pandemic. It is an essential service to a functioning society, period.

My son, and every San Francisco child, deserves the choice to be back to learning in person so their teacher can truly give them guidance through challenging new topics, so they can build bonds and problem-solving skills with their peers, so they can find inspiration to share in storytelling and creative ideas together again.

-----  
For every family that voices their challenges, there are ten that remain silent.

-----  
My children -- 3rd grade and 1st-grade -- have disengaged from school emotionally. They do their assignments with minimal effort - when they do them at all - and take no pride in their learning. Getting them to log into their Zooms each day is a chore, often accompanied by tears and tantrums. We've given up on forcing my older daughter to attend all her classes; that's a losing battle. Both children are depressed and lonely and have been acting out in ways that we rarely saw before schools closed down. My oldest daughter has talked of hurting herself. My 1st-grader says she has nothing to look forward to.

-----  
I don't know how much longer I will be able to keep my job and take care of my children.

-----  
My child has progressively disengaged. He's almost entirely stopped going to school and can barely get out of bed. He's isolated, anxious and moody. He feels unable and inadequate. He's on the verge of a worrisome depression.

-----  
My child is neuro diverse he needs certainties to hang on to or he can't manage. Going back to school would take him out of isolation and provide the structure his day needs. Additionally it would show him that adults in charge actually care about kids and restore the trust he's completely lost than anything is ever going to be ok and that anyone cares about what happens to children.

-----  
Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

My children loved the structure, camaraderie, and diversity of their classrooms. Going back to school is their greatest wish right now. They would be so thrilled to see their classmates again, engage with kids outside their family, collaborate, laugh, get outdoors (something they cannot do during the school day, since there is no one to supervise them), and just be KIDS again!

---

My daughter is a motivated, straight A student but she has had enough. Yesterday, I found her crying, curled in a ball in bed next to her laptop. The amount of emotional energy on her part -- and also mine and my husband's that is required to keep motivating and encouraging and helping her -- is massive. When there is no end to this in sight, that just become harder and harder. She cares SO MUCH about school but being on Zoom (esp. when most kids have cameras off) is not school.

---

I have two high-school students attending Ruth Asawa School of the Arts, a freshman and a senior. Both of my children are in the performing arts. They once were inspired artists who worked hard to get into RASOTA because of their passion for their art. Both are previous straight-A students. The stay-at-home learning has not only crushed their motivation to do well academically, but it has also crushed their passion for their art. My son hasn't touched his instrument in at least nine months. Both of my children are suffering from severe depression. Most evenings at home end in tears from either one or both of them.

---

Even returning one day a week would be transformative. Kids need social interaction. And right now, they need something to look forward to. Every day is the same. It's just a constant stream of tests and assignments. Returning to school would be returning to relationships, spontaneity, new challenges and opportunities.

---

The idea that keeping children at home for over a year, attempting to teach them exclusively via their screens was an acceptable solution to so many people in government and administration is mind boggling to me. As a parent of teenagers I have been fed information by educators for years (state, local, and national) about how important it was for me to get my children off of their screens. How important it was for kids to be outside, interacting in person, learning to socialize in real life. How keeping them home on the screens all the time was extremely harmful to their mental health. And yet, the ONLY answer my school district had to deal with this pandemic was to tell me to keep my kids at home on a screen. How was that even an option in their minds? How were they so blind in disregarding what they already knew to be true regarding our children's health? They KNEW it was going to be harmful to our kids, yet they did it anyway and made exactly zero effort to do anything different. It's criminal.

---

There are so many other things that the district could have done to lessen the damage that didn't involve 100% at-school learning. Where were the sanctioned outdoor gatherings? Kids could have met on the school grounds every other Friday for a couple of hours outdoors, with masks on and safely distanced, supervised from afar by adults, either teachers or volunteers. Where was the outdoor science education? Where was the outdoor physical education? There could have been so many other things, so many small things that could have been done to show that the district cared about our kids' mental health, and yet..... nothing.

---

My kids were doing OK until the last couple of months. Now my sixth grader has hit a wall. He is just refusing to logon for classes that he's particularly stressed about. He is drifting off of zoom during some of the others. He is a kid who enjoyed school, who had to work really hard in some subjects but always achieved good grades. Now he doesn't want to put in that work, he is totally disengaged, he is falling behind in learning, and has lost skills that he had mastered in fourth and fifth grade. He is also having a really difficult time engaging with friends. That part is especially heartbreaking because his ability to form relationships with peers was always a strength, came easy to him, was an aspect of his personality that we really celebrated.

---

Our daughter has lost a LOT of motivation around learning...There are social norms around not having cameras on and so few kids participate that it winds up silencing those who may want to speak because they don't want to be the only kids who talk.

One of her teachers bribes kids by sending them sticks of gum in the mail--he is giving it a herculean effort. Yet in back to school night, he pleaded with all the parents "Please ask your child what we talked about in class and ask them what they said."

---

Zoom-only for middle school has made quiet teenagers even quieter. On the social side, it has been DEVASTATING! This is a time where peer relationships become more important than parent ones, yet the kids have lost all opportunity for impromptu catch-ups, discussions and just filling each others' tanks with the ad-hoc support seeing each other daily in person provides. Most importantly, their identities are taking shape without the normal stimulus of their peers around them. It makes it hard to find oneself or feel "normal" when all you have is the echo-chamber of home, parents and what's selectively revealed to you via online channels.

---

As a sophomore who had their first year of high school cut off and having to adjust to an entirely new way of learning it has been rough. Not only do I attend SOTA which has made trying to do the arts via zoom near impossible but having a strong enough Wifi signal for me and my sister to both do zoom has caused many headaches.

The amount of hours that I have to spend staring at my computer is extremely unpleasant and causes headaches, to do all my classes we must stare at a screen and to do our homework we have to spend even longer. If we try to take dance classes the screen is very small and trying to find a place where I can see it clearly and not bend my neck during singing is difficult.

Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

-----

As a pediatrician and specialist in caring with kids with special needs, most of my clinics these days are spent listening to families unloading on the utter failure of distance learning for their kids. They talk about the inability of their kids to successfully use zoom, lack of their approved IEP resources including rehab therapies and behavioral supports and paras' support, and the utter loss of socialization. The parents are overwhelmed, many have pulled their kids from school altogether, and most feel utterly helpless.

Decreasing the Distance is a collective of parents and caregivers of SFUSD students who are committed to supporting one another and advocating for effective, equitable solutions during the COVID-19 education crisis and beyond.

**[www.decreasingthedistance.org](http://www.decreasingthedistance.org)**