

Reopening Schools Amidst Covid

Intro

[Tejus]

Hi everybody! Welcome to TNT Bombs, a podcast where we discuss issues and topics from a youth perspective. I'm Tejus and

[Tanush]

I'm Tanush. We're both high schoolers from Bellevue, Washington. Today we'll be speaking on the reopening of schools this fall.

[Tanush]

Earlier this spring, Washington State Governor Inslee directed all school districts to offer part-time in-person learning by April 19th of 2021.¹ Many private schools had started hybrid instruction well before then. Now, as the 2020 to 2021 school year comes to a close, there have been many lessons learned about virtual and hybrid instruction. And as Washington State's largest school districts -- including Seattle Public Schools -- plan **a full reopening in the fall**, it's important that we look back on this past year and learn from our mistakes.

So Tejus, why don't you start off with some lessons from last year?

Past Lessons

[Tejus]

This past year, when schools finally opened by late April in Washington State, many of them were restricted to a version of hybrid learning which limited students to only having half of their instruction in person. From personal experience, I can attest that the instruction I received in person this year was far more valuable than the instruction I received online. Not only was it free of all the small tech issues, and constant mishandling of organizing breakout rooms, it was distraction free, and allowed students to create a connection with their teachers. We took for granted the value of teachers being able to speak to their students and get a response, and its importance to learning.

[Tanush]

¹ <https://kuow.org/stories/now-is-the-time-wash-gov-jay-inslee-orders-schools-to-reopen-by-apr-19th>

At the same time, teachers found ways to make the most with their limited time. They were able to fit in a full year's worth of curriculum in less than 40% of the typical instructional time, often by cutting out unnecessary lessons or reducing important labs. By taking these lessons of efficiency into next year, teachers and students can make the most of their learning time.

[Tejus]

Another issue that came up multiple times during the pandemic was the Bellevue School District's conflict with the teacher's union. There were two notable disagreements, one at the beginning of school closures in March of 2020 and another when elementary schools first planned on opening in January of 2021, both of which effectively led to a stoppage of schooling in any fashion due to teacher strikes. These stoppages were unnecessary and were a result of a lack of effective collective bargaining, and had legitimate consequences on instructional time that students received. School districts must make sure that they are on the same page with teacher's unions going into the fall to avoid these issues in the future.

Transition

Ok, so what would school reopening really look like in the fall?

Vaccine Mandate

[Tanush]

A point of contention for the next academic year is whether schools, particularly public schools, should mandate students to get a COVID-19 Vaccine. For context, all five of Washington State's five major public universities are requiring vaccines for the fall quarter with medical, religious, or philosophical exemptions. Washington also has a longstanding policy of requiring K-12 students to get vaccines for diseases like Measles, Chickenpox and Polio,² although families can claim medical or religious exemptions from this requirement.³

[Tejus]

Currently, the Washington State Board of Health has taken the stance that it won't require vaccines until two conditions are met: (1) the FDA approves the vaccines -- right now they just have emergency authorization use, not governmental approval, and (2) the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has to recommend the vaccine for youth.⁴

[Tanush]

² <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/348-051-SchoolChart2020-2021.pdf>

³ <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/schools-could-soon-ban-thousands-of-students-who-arent-compliant-with-washingtons-new-vaccination-law/>

⁴ <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/washington-state-wont-yet-consider-a-covid-19-vaccine-mandate-in-schools/>

Based on all this information, we predict that COVID-19 vaccines will be required next school year, but not until the winter. It's likely that families will still be able to opt for religious and medical exemptions, meaning that families who are skeptical of the vaccine will likely be able to avoid any requirements. And, the vaccine's still not available for children 11 years and younger, so a vaccine mandate would likely not affect 6th graders and below, although Pfizer predicts that we will likely see approval of the vaccine for ages 5-11 around September/October. Thus, with all these limitations, a vaccine mandate will likely be mostly inconsequential.

Yeah exactly, now moving away from the legality of vaccine mandates, let's look at the more tangible effects of reopening on the student experience,

Sports and Clubs

[Tejus]

Some of the most formative experiences teenagers endure at school happen during school sports or extracurricular activities. Each sport and club faced unique challenges during the pandemic. Track and Field, for example, required masks for much of the season and had limited meets. Typical fall sports, like football, were largely pushed back to late winter and spring. Many clubs who hold in-person competitions, including Debate, DECA, HOSA and Robotics, had online competitions. This eliminated much of the social community aspect of these competitions, as well as many of the major educational benefits. Next year, many local club competitions plan on transitioning back in-person, something that most students, including us two, look forward to. Many out-of-state and inter-state competitions, however, plan on staying online, at least for fall. As for sports, although they should be largely back to normal, we are still waiting to see the specifics of "full reopening" in that regard.

Masking and Safety Precautions

Yeah, and one element of "full reopening" that's unclear is if masks and social distancing requirements will stick around in schools.

[Tanush]

- Masks were mandated this past year, but even ignoring legal restrictions there's many practical reasons for schools to mandate masks.
- For example, children 11 years and younger can't get the vaccine, so it would make sense to require vaccines for them to decrease the chance of COVID-19 transmission. Even some students who meet the age requirements still can't get the vaccine because of certain medical conditions they might have, and so school districts might require masks to help protect that part of the student body. And lastly, there's the larger paradigm issue of if schools can assume that everybody will have a vaccine when making these decisions, or if schools have to be "vaccine-blind" so to speak.

Conclusion

Future of Virtual Schooling

[Tejus]

As we're wrapping up, we would be remiss to not discuss the future of virtual schooling. Now obviously it had its plethora of problems this past year and a half, from the mental health crisis many students faced, to socioeconomic inequalities such as internet access, and even the general lack of engagement and motivation that many students felt through the barrier of a screen this year. But the functionality of online classes is undeniable, and for many, it provides an unprecedented amount of flexibility and options. Even though it may not be ideal for mainstream education, it can be better for those in special circumstances.

[Tanush]

- And schools are increasingly recognizing that online learning might be better for some. For example, the BSD's Bellevue Virtual Academy will offer a fully online option for students next year, but one thing to note is that this won't be taught by public school teachers, instead it'll be taught by Edgenuity, which is a private online classes provider. As we see more and more students turn to online options for full-time or supplementary education, private education providers and the issues that come with them will become more prevalent.

Final Thoughts

[Tejus]

Schools have served as a benchmark for how the youth of America have viewed the pandemic. Our lives effectively revolve around our education, and the past year and a half had unexpected changes with drastic consequences, but in all likelihood, schools are going to be back this fall, that's something that's pretty much inevitable. While the specifics of the school reopening, such as a mask or vaccine mandate, may still be up in the air, one thing that's certain is that the upcoming full reopening of schools marks the crossing of the finish line for the end of the pandemic in the United States.

Outro

[Tanush]

And that wraps up this episode of the TNT Bombs Podcast. If you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving a review or sharing the podcast with a friend. Our show notes can be viewed at rebrand.ly/tntbombs (that's r - e - b - r - a - n - d - dot - l - y - slash - tnt bombs). You can also reach out to us through our email, tntbombspodcast@gmail.com. This episode was written, recorded and produced by Tanush Yadav and Tejus Agrawal.

[Tejus]

Thanks for listening, we hope to catch you all in the next one.