

LEAVING THE PANDEMIC BEHIND

By: Max Ziegler

The pandemic has disrupted each of our lives for over two years now, continuing for far longer than any of us expected. Understandably, many have been eager to regain normalcy. As of February, the death rate in our country has declined. Gradually, mitigation measures have been fought and abandoned, resulting in the return of small aspects of our life, one at a time, giving us new appreciation for our daily practices.

2020 and 2021 were labeled by many as the worst years of their lives. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has changed us, and readapting will be difficult.

In early February, an Illinois appellate court upheld a ruling overturning mask mandates, effectively giving schools complete freedom over their mask policies. On February 14, Belleville East announced that masks would no longer be required. The announcement took effect immediately.

Because masks had been required for so long, the abrupt change was shocking to many. Some were concerned the change would affect people mentally or that not wearing a mask could endanger others. The following school day was surreal. Many students' faces were seen for the first time in school buildings. Still, many chose to continue wearing masks. The transition appeared to be going smoothly.

For some, however, the transition was difficult. For example, Mrs. Schrader began one of her Algebra II classes somewhat emotionally as she explained her difficult situation to her class. She requested that her students continue to wear masks while in her classroom. Mrs. Schrader was kind enough to respond to questions, so that her story may be heard by all of Belleville East.

How has the pandemic affected you?

I can't begin to list all the ways the pandemic affected me. From a health standpoint, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and started treatment in December 2019, just before everything shut down. My treatment means that I am immunocompromised. If I were to get Covid-19, not only would I have a harder time fighting the illness, but I would have to stop my treatment. The unknown is scary for everyone, but I was just learning how to adjust to a modified lifestyle that requires a lot of medical care when everything changed.

I also have 3 children in elementary and middle school, and they now had the added burden of not only keeping themselves safe, but keeping me safe. On top of this, they still needed to go to school each day and learn. I think we all know what a challenge remote learning presented to students and staff, and I saw the struggle first hand.

What measures made you feel safer and how?

Being fully remote last year, I had apprehensions about returning to in-person learning. The masking and quarantines eased my concerns, and I am fortunate enough to teach kind and respectful students that understand that the mitigation measures help keep all of us safe. Our family has managed to avoid Covid-19, as far as we know, and I believe that the mitigation measures at school have helped keep us healthy.

Was there ever a time where others didn't respect your concerns about the virus?

I don't know that anyone personally has not respected my concerns about the virus. However, until you are in a position, such as myself, where your immune system does not function like a "normal" person, it's easy to dismiss the impact that the virus could have on those around you. It's been hard to reveal that I have an illness outside of my personal family and friends, and I am not the only one who has a private medical issue. It reminds me of the quote, "Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be Kind. Always."

How did the unmasking of Belleville East affect you at first? What about now, a month later?

The unmasking of Belleville East created a lot of anxiety, especially with the unexpected announcement. I did not realize how emotional the ruling would be for me, and for many of my co-workers. Teaching remotely last year was not ideal, nor was it as effective. My family has also taken risks, allowing our children to continue in sports or activities, so we aren't perfect. However, at school, I was hopeful the masks would stay in place as we finished the year, due to the high success rate of keeping the majority of our staff and students safe and in-person for instruction. My concerns have eased a month later, as the majority of my students and colleagues have stayed masked in front of me, per my request. I am hopeful that the worst is behind us, and I'll be able to finish out the school year healthy.

How did you feel about asking your students to continue wearing masks in your class?

My students have been wonderful. However, it is not comfortable for me to share personal information about my health, as I would not normally be put in such a position. I felt it was important to explain my reasoning, as it is not political, but on the advice of my doctors. I was blown away by the sincerity shown to me, and it just shows that our youth are compassionate and kind humans that will do a lot of good in this world.

Overall, our district has done a great job of taking precautions to keep everyone safe.

Mrs. Schrader bravely spoke up to protect herself in a world that seeks to politicize and divide with every statement, and she did so with compassion and respect. One student stayed after class and apologized for not wearing their mask originally. It didn't matter what rights the student had, how good the statistics were, or what personal beliefs were held. Instead, they took the time to listen and understand.

The most important action we can take is to empathize. Sacrificing our desire to be right can be challenging, but we should reach out with courage, respect, and compassion to understand and help others.

Looking back on the pandemic, we can focus on the division, or we can focus on the positive: the effort made to deal with the difficult situation, the collaboration with others, and the lessons learned about how we live our lives and relate with others. As we leave the pandemic behind, we should take this as an opportunity to focus on the people in our lives and value their perspectives.