

WHY DIGITAL LEARNING MAY BE THE BEST OPTION FOR NEXT YEAR

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After experiencing remote learning regulations in early May, many students are eager to return to their schools to reconnect with their friends, peers, and teachers. However, with coronavirus cases on the rise and families coming back from their vacations, reopening our schools so soon may not be a viable option. Areas of concern such as transportation, in school mobility, and the overall health of our children and faculty obstruct the school district's plan in advancing education safely. Prioritizing public health, especially in a pandemic, should be the main focus in transitioning into our school and to safely continue with our education.

The School District of Philadelphia announced their plans for Advancing Education Safely in late July with the inclusion of additional resources and results from a school-wide survey regarding the upcoming 2020-2021 academic year. The consensus deems that students will be following a hybrid schedule with an emphasis on the attendance of two classes per week, providing remote learning on days when in-person days are not in session. Besides, faculty have also derived the option for a *Digital Academy*. This 100% online option offers students an opportunity to learn remotely without attending school sessions. While applications are in construction, this option is favorable for students with compromised immune systems, underlying health problems, and those who live far from their institutions. However, this option may not apply to all students, especially those who plan on participating in extracurricular activities that require interactions, special programs such as the *International Baccalaureate* and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), those with poor housing conditions, and unreliable internet access.

As a student myself, I question whether our district will be able to conciliate social distancing policies for sectors that are overpopulated, ruined, and limited in spacing. This issue becomes concurrent with the city of Philadelphia's public-school conditions, the unequal funding between schools in suburban and urban communities, as well as the overall people population. My home school, Central High School, assists 2,397 students, as opposed to the average American high school size of 729 students. Due to Central High School's large student body, transitions between classes are often hindered by a sea of students shuffling down crowded corridors to their next period. One student stated that "sometimes [the hallways are] so bad, [they] become a fire hazard", while another commented, "I find myself having to squeeze through the crowd to get to my next class." These are common discussions within the school community and are often shared experiences amongst all classes. Due to the proximity of the students and the structure of the stairwells, these issues add another level of concern for student health as we start to implement social policies to our schools.

However, this issue stems into our classrooms as well. Classrooms often vary in size, while many large classrooms are divided into two sections separated by a thin piece of wall. More times than not, our schools are composed of a series of these halved units, roughly 30 by 30 feet, that limit the area of usable space per section. These tightly linked classrooms easily become a breeding ground for disease and a concern for spreading viruses. "I sat next to a boy who kept coughing and sneezing. By the end of the day, I started having his symptoms too" one of my peers claimed. The lack of circulation and the cycling of students within classes and common areas expedite the spread of airborne illness and growth in risk factors. These are concerns that were brought to discussion by both classmates and friends during our in-school sessions mid-March. These matters trend across Philadelphia, as many schools are experiencing similar flaws in their infrastructure. As district board executives continue to update students, staff, and parents and address rising issues on the newly executed approach, students also pose another issue: transportation.

SEPTA has always been a popular mode of transportation amongst secondary school students. Being notorious for their crowds and narrow spaces, taking public transportation violates social distancing policies in a poorly ventilated area. Though schools may have plans to safeguard their environments, buses, trains, and trolleys have difficulty addressing all health regulations (such as consistent sanitation of both buses and people). These vehicles are limited by the constant flow of traffic, posing a risk to students as they journey to their destinations to and from school. Also, the chances of cross-contamination continue to rise especially when students return home. This concern is extremely pressing given the poverty rates of Philadelphians, existing at a staggering 26 percent. Impoverished families often cannot afford to purchase the inflated prices of cleaning supplies, face masks, nor hand sanitizers, leaving them defenseless during this pandemic. Because of this reality, preventatives from their educational institutions are often fallacious, for they are unable to encompass their familial circumstances.

As summer winds down and schools consider reopening, students, families, and faculty are offered the opportunity to continue

education remotely or transition into a hybrid schedule. Many factors in addition to the ones stated above make the *Digital Academy* route a more viable and practical option as cases continue to rise nationally. The need for transportation and risks are minimized with the application of remote learning. Living in the digital renaissance adds to the interconnectivity between mentor and mentees, and with the incorporation of various interfaces and platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom, we are able to stay in touch with our academic advancements in the comfort of our homes. Though students may have concerns about the quality of education provided by “on-screen” teachers, curriculums are enacted to conform to student’s instructional needs. During these uncertain times, we must continue to be patient, persistent, and flexible, for these are key components to a successful year.

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