

## THE VIRTUES AND VICES OF VIRTUAL LEARNING

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Before Covid, I was accustomed to a monotonous lifestyle. Wake up, get to school, learn, play tennis, take the bus home, eat dinner, do homework and dishes, go to sleep, wake up and do it all over again. Hazy from repetition, I lost contact with myself. But when the doors of my school abruptly slammed closed, I was introduced to a new way of living. I did not need to wake up at 6:30 am to run to the bus stop. I was waking up for a class at any hour I chose. I was not locked in an overpacked and understaffed building for 7 hours at a time with a stiff schedule. I could go to my backyard to paint before Pre-Calc or lie on my couch to apply to scholarships between Physics and Spanish. With a more diverse schedule, I was no longer exhausted or unfocused just a few hours into the school day. The ability to tailor my education in accordance with my needs finally gave me control over my journey as a student.

However, my situation may be considered unique when compared with those of children across the city. The lack of physical school gave me more time to relax and destress. However, many other students needed to go to school every morning. Some of my peers relied on the free cafeteria food to quell the growling in their stomachs. Others utilized their school's computer room to complete their homework before heading home. Virtual learning for them was not liberation, it was obstruction. Although the school district eventually instituted programs for free food and chromebooks, it was too late. The pandemic was not a hidden bomb that unexpectedly erupted in our cities. As Covid advanced through Asia and Europe, we had time to prepare for its impact. We had time to prepare a plan for virtual learning inclusive of all students regardless of economic standings. However, we simply crossed our fingers as the virus slithered its way through the open doors of our schools.

The idea of reopening schools with tighter restrictions this fall may be enticing when considering the large number of students who depend on physical schooling. Yet, it is still unwise. There is truly no way to guarantee the safety of all students. Especially when the district is not providing Covid testing for students and staff before they rejoin school. What happens if just one student tests positive? Would the school need to shut down? What about the teachers and staff the student interacted with while positive? Should the schools of their children be closed? Have we considered the friend who the student was talking to while on the bus ride to their respective schools? Should the friend's school close? The schools of the students' siblings? The schools of the student's classmates' siblings? Do we continue this domino effect until every school in the district is yet again learning virtually?

It does not seem reasonable to reopen schools when the possibility of just one confirmation would send the whole system spiraling. Rather than risk another surge in cases, we should provide students with an online platform that provides them with their needs from the beginning. Admittedly, I do not know how that would look. However, I know we can learn from our mistakes made last spring and truly take time to develop virtual schooling inclusive of all Philadelphian students.

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