

My School Experience During the Pandemic: The View from Middle School

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I vividly remember the day we learned that we would not have school because of the pandemic. The day was March 13, 2020, and I was in sixth grade. We were in my school's dining hall, Friends Select, in Center City, Philadelphia. Earlier that week, some eighth-grader told us that we might not have school for six weeks because of Coronavirus starting in a week. We were all excited about an extended spring break. We had an assembly about how we will be doing our work. We were told that we would use Google Classroom for every class. Daily work was to be posted online, and then it would be completed and submitted digitally. This was just the beginning of my experience as a middle schooler, where everything seemed to be in constant change.

Since we were in 6th grade, each piece of work assigned to us on Google Classroom could not take longer than 20 minutes. I was done "school" by 10-11 o'clock every day. Everything changed once again when the lockdown was extended to the end of the school year. We now had Zoom classes for half of the day, and for the other half, we would do work for the assigned lessons. It wasn't only classes that were on Zoom. I go to a Quaker school. We also had time for Meeting for Worship, where we would all log onto Zoom and stay muted. If you felt moved to say something, you would unmute and say whatever you would say.

Even though our teachers worked hard to make school "normal," people either watched something on their computer, played video games, or did something on their phones. I may have done that, too, but I had other things. I took an accelerated math course where I had to teach myself pre-algebra and then take a placement test at the end of the year. The score determined whether I got to take algebra the following year. At the same time, with all of this change and hard work, I was also studying for my Bar Mitzvah, which also transitioned to Zoom. I wasn't sure what my Bar Mitzvah would look like. At the end of the year, I passed the placement test and was going to take algebra in 7th grade.

Besides all the serious work I had done during sixth grade, I got to have fun. Since I live in the city on a smaller street with many people I'm friends with around me, we started to make up new games to play, and we also played wiffleball, football, and basketball. It was a fun time because the weather was beautiful almost every day. I learned it was important not to stay cooped up in one place all day. I'm thankful to have lived in a great city during this pandemic experience.

When seventh grade came around, I felt the most prepared for the year that I have ever felt. Looking back, I was wrong. Before the school year started, I was asked to be on a committee for the new Latin teacher because the old one had left—another change. The year started with us being online. Only for a week before going back to school did Friends Select decide that we would be a hybrid of in-person and online learning—another change. This change meant you were in school on Monday and Tuesday or Thursday and Friday. Wednesdays were a non-traditional learning day.

On the days when you were in the building, we had regular classes, but instead of you going to your teachers for lessons, we stayed in one room except for math and foreign language. We also had to bring our lunches, and we had to eat them in the classroom we were in, and we had to eat in silence. On the days when you weren't in the building, you would go to a Zoom room. This is why the hybrid model is the worst learning model we had during the pandemic. Luckily for the last quarter, everyone was in the building, and the only difference was that we stayed in one classroom and were wearing masks all day, but the shows weren't as annoying because it just felt normal at that point.

Now I'm wrapping up my eighth-grade year, which has not had a single Zoom class. This change has made school finally feel normal. Oddly, I think it has been the most stressful. I had an excellent start to the year. I felt good. When the second quarter started, however, it was time to start looking at high schools, which shifted my focus away from my school work. I thought about whether I would stay at Friends Select or if I would switch. I wondered if I would do well enough on placement tests to get into other schools. I had to visit and interview the other schools virtually. It was probably the worst quarter I had. My grades fell, but I stayed with it and did well in the third quarter. That was around when I figured out that I would stay at the same school, and it gave me a boost of confidence.

Now it's my last middle school quarter, which has gotten me thinking about how my middle school experience was different from everyone who has had a middle school experience before me. The pandemic has affected all of us, whether in school or not.