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After spending the majority of the pandemic melting into my desk chair as I passed through countless days of online classes, I wholeheartedly embraced the chance to return to school in person, even if it was set to be a hybrid schedule at first. At the onset of the pandemic, I was halfway through eighth grade in middle school. As I entered high school for the first time after taking classes completely virtually over the past two years, it was as though I had clicked a fast-forward button to my freshman year. Returning to in-person classes was a strange experience for me. As America slowly transitioned into in-person teaching, I learned many new things about the high school I had never been in. As the worst of the pandemic came to pass, we all prepared to take on the school year, this time with no buttons to turn off, mics to mute, or filters to add to our faces.

During the few times I had been in school during the pandemic, the hallways were mostly empty, with few people in each classroom. This began to change as vaccines were released, and students started feeling comfortable with the idea of going back to school. Before I knew it, the hallways were packed, and it would be difficult to get to class—let alone practice social distancing. Even though my high school building was the same one I had attended as a middle schooler, returning from online courses, it seemed as if everything had changed. I felt thrust into a completely new environment, and even the school itself seemed foreign to me. After spending over a year in the comfort of my home, I was suddenly thrust into a new environment, and it was undeniably difficult for me to adjust. The school environment was not the only foreign change I felt with this new normal.

With the small-scale adjustments, such as getting used to crowded hallways, came greater changes. With the significant events that unfolded over the pandemic, I realized how daunting the world could be. As we transitioned back into in-person learning, it was inevitable to see that some people were missing due to Covid, whether it was students or staff. Even I personally knew some friends that had contracted Covid. But for the staff, not all the absences were due to illness; at one point, the school notified us that some teachers had been "released," with one of them let go for "unsavory" racial remarks.

With the growing prevalence of anti-Asian hate, I grew worried as an Asian-American. It made me wonder how safe my school was when cases of anti-Asian hate in schools were constantly reported. This concern deepened as the former president made remarks including "Kung flu" and "China virus." While my fears were somewhat eased by the fact that my district was predominantly Asian, I grew worried for friends and family living elsewhere. I could not help

but feel more conscious about my identity as an Asian-American as I passed through my school's hallways. However, not all changes were negative. I could find joy in some small positive changes. I enjoyed finally seeing my friends in class and working alongside them in our school library in person once again.

I have now begun to settle back into the rhythm of this new normal. I am starting to enjoy my classes more and studying hard—on top of catching up with friends I haven't seen for so long. I am slowly coming to terms with just how much my life has changed as I return to in-person classes. Although there have been some rough times, I am looking forward to making the best of this new normal handed to us. Despite the difficulties of the pandemic, I have gained new knowledge and understanding of myself and my environment. I am now more aware of the hate shown in the news. I've also grown in my identity and pride as an Asian-American. Through this experience, I have resolved to succeed in school even without the filters of a mic and camera button hovering on my laptop screen.