

Transition and Reentry in the Pandemic

Evan Ho - 11th Grade

Edgemont High School; Scarsdale, NY

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to transform our daily lives, forcing us to find new ways for personal growth and ideas for how we come together as a community. The restructuring of our education has been one of the fundamental, pandemic-related changes with the greatest personal impact on me. Online instruction, masking, and last-minute changes to deal with new outbreaks and variants have made the last two years feel like a social experiment to remake schooling — all during the most critical years of education for me personally.

The current year is particularly noteworthy as it marked our first effort to transition back to being in class full-time. Seeing all my classmates at school was refreshing and provided a sense of hope that we finally were making meaningful progress towards pre-pandemic normalcy. Masking and distancing protocols, which at first were cumbersome, have become second nature over the past two years. One adjustment that unexpectedly proved to be more challenging for me was the increase in the daily workload that came with a return to attending school in person. The first year of the pandemic, my sophomore year, consisted of 100% online instruction followed later by a combination of in-person and virtual classes. Classes that typically would have been in session daily met less often to accommodate this schedule, compromising the amount of material covered.

The need to rely on take-home or online exams made for fewer exams overall as well. These were necessary accommodations but produced the uneasy feeling that the quality of our education had been compromised, leaving students responsible for filling whatever gaps. Transitioning back this year to a more routine schedule of classes and workload was a bit jarring. Homework, quizzes, and tests were amped up, and extracurricular sports, clubs, and after-school activities also returned to fill up our schedules. The return to this demanding workload was at first daunting, but comforting to know these steps were in place so that we may be better prepared for the future.

Beyond the learning experience, the changing social dynamics in school with full in-person participation took some personal adjustment. I had almost forgotten how a full classroom looked and felt, and to my surprise, I struggled at first to participate and contribute in class. I had gotten used to being in class with as few as eight kids at a time or participating in debates and conversations in virtual classes from the comfort of my room. The new shyness I experienced in front of the full class revealed how socially isolating the first half of the pandemic was for my classmates and me, even despite the ready availability of technologies to call, text, and video

chat. The experience highlights the importance of direct human interactions for my mental health and well-being. Something as simple as being able to eat lunch with my friends and socialize during free periods has helped me deal with the stresses of school and lifted some of the dark clouds that COVID-19 has brought.

The multiple transitions in our educational experience throughout the pandemic have been unprecedented. Simply put, no other generation has had to experience learning in this manner, and the consequences, good and bad, remain uncertain. Still, what I know for certain is that these experiences have helped me better understand my personality— revealing areas where I need to develop and grow. It has taught me resilience and adaption in a manner that cannot be replicated.