First Day Back

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I love the car ride to the first day of school. I feel excited about seeing the familiar yet transformed faces I haven't seen for three months. The day is filled with many, *"Hi, how was your summer?!"* meeting teachers and focusing on new classes. On the car ride to my first day of junior year, what was technically the first real school year post-Covid, I was hopeful that life would return to normal. A regular schedule, school sports, spending in-between-class breaks with friends and teachers, and P.E. spent doing something other than walking around a track for forty-five minutes. Getting out of the car that morning, though, was not what I had hoped. Instead of seeing the typical first-day-back-from-summer-smiles, mask-clad faces screamed out that we were not returning to "normal."

I was nervous leading up to that day. It would be a day of first impressions. I would be meeting some people in person for the first time in my very small school district. I worried about how the administration would ease us back into this new but what should have been an old way of doing school. I worried about what learning in a classroom, all day, in masks would be like for me. Would my brain adjust? I was aware that some teachers were more anxious than others, some more ambivalent about teaching in person, and I felt I had to appropriately shift my "COVID attitude" with each teacher for them to like me. The pressure felt immense. And the rules were abundant.

These rules were jarring after spending my summer outside with "looser" virus restrictions. I understood the need for this structure and felt grateful to be back in person, but I couldn't help but feel a loss of freedom. No ordering outside food to the school (a common practice at my school), staying six feet away from people at all times (nobody followed that one), only three people at each library and lunch table, moving away from the class if you wanted to take a sip of water (something that required your mask to be down for a maximum of three seconds), and so on and so on. I felt like I couldn't walk, talk, eat or breathe freely. There was much care for physical safety and every nuance of our behavior, but little care for our mental safety.

My academic reentry was rough. The year before was "unprecedented," as the politicians and administrators liked to say. Massive breaks in the middle of the school day during our "transition" period, so students had "enough" time to travel a maximum of two miles from the school to their home or vice-versa, depending on which cohort they were in. It was nearly impossible to pay attention during my at-home part of the "hybrid" day. I'd find myself staring at a poster in my room, then suddenly realizing I had completely lost focus. Going to school in person for half the day and then online for the other half was disjointing, yet I was aware of the

privilege of even having that option. I found myself vacillating between putting little effort into school and trying to work hard yet spinning my wheels, and it was difficult to find the motivation to care. The world I was living in, internally and externally, was in disarray. This took a great toll on me this year, this "all-important" junior year. I was slammed with work from the beginning. It wasn't like last year. Not even close. There was no easing in. My grades suffered that first quarter. I had whiplash. I didn't put in as much effort as I needed to, and I had no idea what these "new" standards were. I went from one semester of in-person ninth grade to the Covid time to being a full-fledged junior who was supposed to balance A.P. classes, sports, colleges, letters of recommendation, etc. My classmates and I were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean after hanging out in the shallow end of the kiddie pool.

Not surprisingly, all of this affected my mental health. I was suddenly feeling depressed. Most of my teachers, who were dealing with their reentry struggles, were so determined to "return to normal" that I think they lost sight of where the students were academically and psychologically. No extra-credit opportunities. No due date extensions. No checking in. It was test, after test, after test, after test.

"We have to prepare you in time for the A.P. exam."

"We have to move quickly to get through the curriculum."

"We have a lot to catch up on."

"Honors classes are hard."

"I don't give extensions for workload issues."

I emerged from that first day and that first-quarter a little tattered but in one piece. Maybe even stronger. I reached out for support from my family and friends. I focused more academically on the classes that were moving at lightning speed. I dug deep inside of myself to make changes. Some teachers ultimately softened a bit, perhaps needing a period of adjustment themselves. I am aware that I am lucky. My school did a better job managing life in the pandemic than many. But when I reflect on this reentry period, I feel that some teachers, the administration, and even the world missed fundamental lessons from this pandemic experience. We should have learned to prioritize. We should have learned what was important. We should have learned to show up for people. We should have learned that there are much better ways to assess understanding than multiple-choice tests. We should have learned to ask how someone is doing. What should've been saying is, "We need to make sure you are okay. Let me help you learn. Your mental health is more important than getting a paper in at 11:59 pm on a Wednesday. We are here for you."