

Greetings,

As requested, below is my public comment from this week's board meeting.

Best,

Kate

Greetings my name is Kate Larose and I'm a Northeast Kingdom resident. I shared my concerns at last month's board meeting that medically vulnerable students are being systemically pushed out of and denied free, appropriate public education during an ongoing pandemic.

I want to start by thanking the board and Agency of Education for considering my input at last month's meeting, and extend my appreciation to Secretary French for reminding local education agencies of their legal obligations to students.

Though my child now has access to safe, in-person instruction, I continue to speak out because I know this is still not the case for many, and that my child's district is currently the anomaly in Vermont.

Over the past 16 months, I've become increasingly alarmed by the lack of alignment I've noticed in our state's educational and public health leadership when it comes to moving forward in an equitable way. Though the pandemic has been difficult for everyone- especially schools- it has hit families with disabilities the hardest and this continues to be the case.

Though prevalent messaging tells us that the pandemic is in the rearview, the worst impacts of the ongoing pandemic are still yet to come for the medically vulnerable.

I am here again today to ask that this disproportionate harm be acknowledged, and that meaningful action be taken...not a year from now when monitoring schools via desk audits, but as reports of harm come in.

There's a saying that goes, "If there's a discrepancy between what you say and what you do, I'm going to believe what you do every time."

A week after Secretary French's brief email went out to superintendents, several LEAs continued to summarily deny masking requests via IEP and 504 meetings.

I couldn't help but wonder if this might be attributed to the historical lack of alignment between words and actions in this matter, and I was reminded of these three examples:

1. The [June 2021 email to superintendents from the AOE](#) making it clear the expectations that schools are not to impose masking
2. Sec. French's October 2021 attendance at a Canaan School Board meeting (in which he himself was maskless in a school gymnasium during an active outbreak, going against his own agency's guidance). At that meeting he congratulated the school board-the first in the state to drop protections- for doing such a great job keeping students safe, and boasted about their high student vaccination rate (this despite having the lowest vaccination rate in the state, and a lower rate than Florida at the time)
3. And the [March 2022 email from Sec. French to an acting superintendent](#) which ridiculed her decision to keep staff and students safe via masking.

So perhaps then it's no wonder that families are still being denied protections as of today.

Though some districts won't even consider masking as a 504 or IEP possibility, others are claiming that doing so would "fundamentally alter the nature of their programming". Which is an odd excuse to make about a modification that was recently made statewide for more than 12 continuous months.

Our children deserve better than this. Whether it be an issue of needing intervention, assistance, support-whatever you'd like to call it- it's not too much to ask in this moment that meaningful action be taken to protect those who are most at risk.

This morning I turned to my child and I asked her what she'd like to share with you about the last year and a half of her life. This is what she said:

"Not being able to go to school was really awful. And it made me really sad. And a lot of people don't have the courage to self advocate. I want [the state board and agency] to advocate and stand up for kids like me."

I would again like to thank AOE leadership for their words.

Now we need action.

To echo the words of my child, please advocate and stand up for the students who need it most.

This moment calls for nothing less than an [urgency of equity](#) in both words and actions.

Thank you.