

Lessons from One Year of Distance Learning

"The way we spend our time defines who we are." Jonathan Estrin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a year has passed since San Francisco shuttered its schools to in-person learning. The City's COVID positivity rate is consistently the lowest of major US cities, having risen, fallen, spiked, and dropped since mid-January to a current level of 1.1%. In September, the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) allowed schools to begin reopening, and most of our City's private and parochial schools have done so and currently serve more than 15,000 students. City-run learning hubs have been operational all year, serving over 2,000 of SFUSD's most high-risk students.

On March 5, 2021, a year into the pandemic and following months of massive public pressure, the San Francisco Board of Education finally announced a plan for "in-person learning at some schools."

By late April, 60% of SFUSD students should have the opportunity to return to school in person for an undetermined number of days per week until the last day of school, June 2nd. However, there is still no plan for nearly all middle and high school students.

Additionally, parents are still confused regarding plans for the 2021-2022 academic year. The recent declaration of commitment to in-person learning for all grades by August did not specify if students would be returning for 5 days or not, or for how long per day. Even the President of the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), Susan Solomon, called in to publicly comment at the March 17th Board of Education Special Meeting, saying San Francisco needs to prepare for the possibility that "maybe it won't be full-day, five days a week" in the fall.

SFUSD teachers have now all been given the opportunity to be vaccinated. And Governor Newsom has announced that all Californians should have access to vaccines by May 1st.

There is much work left to be done to safely bring our students back to school full-time and to address the losses and damage. But it is also important to take a look at how we got to this place, in order to glean lessons and point ourselves towards a better future.



This imperative prompted Families for San Francisco to look more closely at the Board of Education's actions between May 12, 2020 and March 11, 2021. Our assessment reveals some uncomfortable truths about our current Board (for a more in-depth review of each of the following four points, please go to the Lessons Learned section):

1. **The Board of Education did not understand the magnitude of the challenge before them.** Their first critical error was rejecting outside help, insisting that developing a plan must be done in-house despite the recommendation of the Superintendent to hire professional education consultants for much needed assistance.
2. **The Board of Education failed to deliver a plan** that followed the California Education Code's requirement that information to the public be "specific, concise and clear." The information has been confusing, incomplete, and in many cases not a plan at all but rather, as City Attorney Herrera stated, "a plan to make a plan."
3. **The Board of Education's priorities are out of sync** with those of San Francisco's families. The Board consistently placed reopening discussions far down on their meeting agendas, forcing parents to wait for hours to share public comments or hear the latest reopening updates. Just this past January, only two Commissioners (out of seven) identified reopening schools as one of their top two priorities. Reopening stalled while actions on renaming schools and changing the Lowell admissions policy were swift and decisive. Despite insisting that reopening has always been their priority, their actions belie their words.
4. Efforts to prioritize educating our students began only when public pressure became insurmountable for the Board. Our assessment highlights the importance of public engagement in local government. The Board of Education did not act until public pressure mounted to a level that included national ridicule, a legal challenge, an active effort to recall them, and public calls for resignation. **Public pressure works, get involved and stay involved!**

As we emerge from this pandemic and our children and teachers go back to school, we cannot forget these lessons. So many of us care deeply about and pay attention to national and international politics, but we need to pay attention to our local government as well. On a local level, our voices can be heard and effective – but only if we pay attention and stay involved.

Families for San Francisco's objective is to keep you informed and educated on the issues that affect your daily life. We do this so that when we advocate for change, we do it from a position of knowledge and collective strength. We are already 4,000 members strong, from all walks of life.

Join us and let your voice be heard.