

Written Testimony of

**Erin Pinsky**  
**Joel Barlow High School Educator**

Before the Education Committee

**SB 977 AN ACT CONCERNING VIRTUAL LEARNING.**

March 8, 2021

Dear Representative Robert Sanchez, Senator Douglas McCrory, and members of the Education Committee,

My name is Erin Pinsky and I am a high school educator in my ninth year in the profession. I teach at Region 9, Joel Barlow High School, and I was Barlow's Teacher of the Year in 2019-2020 and a Connecticut State Finalist. I teach AP U.S. History, American Government, and Issues in World Geography.

I understand the proposed bill, SB 977, is considering uniformity for virtual learning as each district had to adjust delivery modes of instruction given our public health crisis with COVID-19. While I appreciate the General Assembly's desire to protect educational standards and support educators in their field through professional development, continuing virtual learning beyond times of emergency would be detrimental to those at the heart of what we do: students.

Educators have shifted instruction at every point in this crisis to better meet the needs of their students. We are intimately aware of the issues with equity, engagement, access, and accountability that come with remote learning. We are passionate about developing students who are not just academically strong but individuals who exude empathy, citizenship, and resilience. Students are reticent to speak in a digital platform and often resort to using the private chat feature to share their thoughts with me only. While I narrate the responses in the chat, it is not a conversation because students do not wish to be identified. The result is poorer educational outcomes; students are not speaking to each other and often honestly report that they are distracted by other devices, minimizing their learning and the learning of others. I especially worry about this at the high school level when we do not have more years with our students before sending them into collegiate seminar classrooms or onto their career path. Placing a screen between them and their teachers dramatically reduces our ability to cultivate the types of thinkers and learners our society needs in the future.

Further, these cracks in education's foundation become deeper chasms with interrupted and disjointed instruction when teaching in two modalities. Perpetuating the possibility of remote learning also means that students and teachers will always juggle in-person and remote instruction occurring at the same time. In the past year, I have taught in the following models: remotely, hybrid, and all-in. Since remote learning is still an option for students and families, I teach two separate groups of students simultaneously. In-person learning does not automatically transfer online and it cannot be replicated. It is also not as simple as merely displaying the same material in both places. For example, students were asked to peer edit an analytical essay in pairs. In-person learners had the benefit of asking each other for clarification, conversing about their pieces in a natural flow of conversation that cultivated community

along with their writing skills. There is a loss of that community online. Remote learners were in pairs in breakout rooms but had electronic copies of the peer editing rubric and mostly stayed muted, merely typing in feedback to their peer without any interaction. This example and countless others are of grave concern if we consider the social and emotional wellbeing of students. At the high school level, we grapple with difficult topics in our disciplines, such as the Connecticut state mandate to teach about genocide, and to have those conversations across a screen reduces a student's ability to process, question, and work through such serious episodes in our history.

Furthermore, remote learning cannot replace in-person learning, nor should there be provisions that would ensure its future. After all the pandemic has brought and the losses incurred, students need school: interpersonal interaction, engagement with peers and teachers, and more varied and richer instructional strategies. When we reduce learning to a series of clicks on a device, we lose the power of small moments in a classroom that make a student feel safe, cared for, and confident. Last year before the pandemic I saw one of AP students struggling not to cry as he stared down at an assessment. This was one of my top performers and I knew something was amiss. It was a quiet moment of distress that had he been bent over a computer screen and not personally in front of me, I would not have sensed. I wrote a message on a Post-It Note that I was proud of him, regardless of his score. I told him I believed that he is more than a grade, more than that number, and that his self-worth was not contingent upon the outcome of that assessment. The look of relief, gratitude, and appreciation brought an immediate change and he squared his shoulders and completed the assessment. He shared a picture of that Post-It Note on his desk as he took his AP exam last May remotely from home and he carries that Post-It Note in his wallet to this day. I know that we often try to quantify educational outcomes but I urge you to consider that the success our schools have with students often cannot be quantified. Please do not eliminate the powerful actions educators around the state take each and every day when they are in the room with their students.

Teaching is a calling and educators have so many tools in our toolbox ready to re-emerge once our health crisis is in a safer realm. Please do not take action based upon the experience of one year alone in an altered setting. I urge you to take my testimony and that of other educators into consideration on this bill. Thank you for your time and your efforts to ensure quality education endures for students in our state.

Respectfully,

Erin Pinsky

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