MARYANN

We are a group of mothers and grandmothers who are responsible for the education of 14 children from pre-k to university. Many of our children have special needs and learning disabilities. Some attend special needs schools, others have Individualized Education Programs. Many of us face accumulated difficulties and we all have a firm belief that quality education is crucial for children to thrive in life.

We would like to start this presentation with some of our experiences as mothers and grandmothers. We all agreed that remote learning is stressful:

One of us said: “I don’t sleep now as much as I used to because of stress. I wake up in the morning with a headache and I’m already stressed.”

Remote learning is really time consuming. You pull your hair out. We feel a lot of emotional distress. We want our kids to learn and at the same time we’re dealing with our own stress, with our kids’ stress. How are we supposed to support ourselves and our children? Who comes first? We don’t want to put it like that — it’s very harsh. Trying to be that perfect parent is not realistic.

We ask ourselves the questions: What are schools doing about these mental health, stress, and depression issues? And what are they going to do about them once school restarts? Will they be recognized, or will our children be labeled as “troubled” or “at risk” children?

There is a strong sentiment that as parents we lack the necessary knowledge and training to accompany our children through remote learning. A participant addressed this issue:

“I feel ill equipped to accompany my children. I don’t have the skills. I don’t want to feel that I’m neglecting my child but I’m not prepared for this.” It’s not that we don’t want to do this but we don’t know how to do it. Teaching is a profession, you need a degree, and we’re not educated as teachers are. Parents don’t know how their children learn and behave at school; teachers should be sharing that with us.
Parents are the children’s first educators but it’s not the parents’ job to do the teaching; they can collaborate with the teacher and facilitate the process. We know a mother who is desperate because she has three kids with special needs and she has a full-time job. So it’s very unfair to put this responsibility onto the parents.

We thought that there should be online classes for parents to prepare them. At the same time, we don’t know how parents would have the time to be trained, because they have all the other things to do.

**KIM**

A lot of parents are feeling judged; they feel under the school’s pressure and on schedule. When you have several kids to take care of, including an 8-month-old, how can you teach the other kids with no help?

That’s why we think parents should do it at their own pace and teachers should respect their rhythm.

We also realized that teachers are being paid to do their job; we, parents, are not being paid for this.

As parents we feel that it’s not realistic to expect us to do so much because we don’t have the same setting as in school. Family settings, culture, values, and modes of functioning are not adapted for school learning and cannot change from one day to the other. Every child and every home is different. When children go to school they’re in a classroom with their teacher. But now they’re at home with their moms, and they’re not going to take it as seriously, no matter how much they love the work they do. We feel that the decision to move to remote learning was rushed.

**As parents we need to say something about this, otherwise we'll be forgotten.** One of us is a member of the Community Education Council of her district. She said: “We need to bring these ideas and voices to the various councils, because I’m saying this to them but I am only one person. If we came together and we say this collectively, it will make the message stronger, it will make a difference”.

Finally, everyone says that we’re all in this together but at the same time, for parents who have the hardest times, where is the support? We worry especially for parents who don’t speak English or are deaf. Do we know how many there are? How can they help their children? What is the interaction with them? Will they have any voice to express their concerns?

**We’d like now to talk about our children’s experiences.**

We realize that if we are nervous, worried, and stressed and we cannot sleep at night, our children are, too. Children are not only stressed and frustrated; they are also bored.

We don’t like remote learning, especially for children with special needs. The children who have the most difficulties should be a priority and our reference. What are we going to put in place for children with special needs? Why are they not being put first?
TINA

Children with learning disabilities need hands-on instruction with the teachers. It's impossible for children with special needs to learn remotely. They cannot have physical, speech, or occupational therapy remotely.

It's important to make sure that teachers won't give up on the students who struggle the most. And we know that's very hard when you're not in the same room.

One of us spoke of her experience with her son with reading and learning disabilities: “My son is having a lot of stress and anxiety throughout this remote learning, even with the little things we try to do twice a day. So I called the principal and said that we were going to take a break from remote learning this week, because he needs to relax and not have an all structured week. The principal said, ‘Try, at least, to see if he can catch up on the homework during the weekend;’ and I said, ‘Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t want him to fail. It’s just that we can’t do this.’”

Another mother said: “I worry about teenagers. I have the hardest time with my 16-year-old. He has ADHD. I wonder if he’s okay because I see on Facebook that a lot of teenagers commit suicide. Do I have to talk to him more? Do I have to sit more with him? Do I have to ask him questions? Keep an eye on him?”

We know that getting services for your child with special needs requires a lot of advocacy, and many parents cannot do that because they’re working full time.

We also have many questions and different experiences about learning. Our bigger questions are: What is the proof that remote learning is having a positive impact on our children's wellbeing? What can we create so our children keep learning? What is the useful knowledge that children of today need in order to develop?
And one of us said: “I like online learning because it gives freedom to my child to learn and not be stressed about other children, about bullying. But I know they need social interaction with other kids. So it’s fifty/fifty for me.” Another mother said: “They have to stop this remote learning because it’s not working.”

ROSETTA

Most of us think that children don’t learn online. You cannot replace a teacher by a screen. What should be changed so that children can still learn, knowing that children need other children to learn?
We have many concerns about technology: Computers are addictive, and our children are learning to be on the computer from 9 am to 5 pm. Now some children are addicted to the computer, and we know that this is not a good sign of mental health. Some of us feel we’re going backward. These virtual classes are not making our kids smarter.
We need to know more about screen time and the kids' brains. What does neuroscience says about this?
We have realized that not all schools use the same teaching methods and presence, that different districts are doing different things. As every school works differently, it doesn’t always help parents to come together and help one another. We have questions about this: Were teachers given the option to do differently? Why are not all teachers doing Zoom classrooms? We wonder if all schools should have had the same direction, one curriculum.

We realize as well that even if the teachers are certified, it’s new for them to accompany children who are not in the same room. We think that new academic learning should have been stopped completely in March, and children should have reinforced what was taught until March. We feel that we should take this opportunity of having to create a new curriculum for remote learning to teach children things that are useful. Children should also learn basic life skills and things they will use in the future. More than ever now, it shouldn’t be about testing and memorizing, but about learning critical thinking and reasoning. Children should be learning without realizing that they are learning.

**We worry about summer school.** Who will have to attend? What criteria will be used? What if the kid excels on school-based skills, like interaction with teachers and with other kids, but because they’re at home or don’t speak the language, they’ll be graded differently? Summer school will be a punishment for children who didn’t learn during the remote learning, as those are the children who may need a break more than any other children. Sometimes we feel they’re putting our children at the bottom again.

We feel that whatever we say, parents will be blamed — blamed for not having made their child successful at remote learning, and blamed for asking a break for their children.

**STACY**

We know that it's possible that next school year, remote learning will have to continue at some point. How can we have a dialogue to build a better remote learning together? Some of us think this is not going to work for our children. Kids cannot seat six feet apart, or interact with their friends from six feet apart. Even if we find a vaccine, children will have been absent from school for six months. The transition to school is going to be very difficult, for the kids and for the teachers. These children have been used to being at home, staying in their pajamas, eating when they want to eat. We also know that schools are going to be worse than they are right now because of budget cuts. Schools are going to be underfunded and programs cut. We realize that what is happening now was already happening before. There is huge inequality in education, especially if you’re in a poor district or a district where parents are less involved. It seems unfair that some schools have access to some tools and others don’t. Remote learning is making these inequalities bigger and more visible.
Having in mind our experiences we would like to offer the following proposals:

Budget should be strengthened, not cut. Money not used for all the cancelled programs should be used to hire virtual assistants for classrooms that are overcrowded and to make sure children with special needs get the education they need.

More transparency in the decisions that are made is needed. Explaining decisions by saying “with the ongoing pandemic” is not an excuse for the lack of transparency.

Parents, including those with the most difficult situations, should be invited into the conversation and help design new policies going forward.

Children with special needs and learning disabilities should

Services should be put in place to address the mental health, stress and depression issues this crisis is creating in children.

New curriculum should be created more centered around learning life skills, critical thinking and reasoning than memorizing and testing.

All policies and measures should be evaluated for their impact on inequality. Priority should be given to policies and programs that help shorten the inequality gap.

To end this contribution, we would like to share a challenge: we really would like to understand with the panelists and other participants how remote learning could be organized differently so all the students can benefit from it and it wouldn’t leave the ones who struggle the most even further behind.