

1040 Park Avenue West Highland Park, IL

July 24, 2020

To the Township High School District 113 Board,

I hope all members of the board and their families are doing well and are in good health.

The fact that greetings like this have become so common speaks to the topic of this letter. At this point we are all well aware of the threat of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) and maybe more so, apathy towards its unprecedented virulence.

I am proud member of the Loyola University Chicago class of 2020. I graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in bioinformatics and will be continuing my education as a Ph. D student at the University of California, Davis. I mention this because as a dedicated student, I wish to express my thoughts of behalf of current District 113 students.

As I ended my college education over a Zoom call, I felt a lack of closure that no online ceremony could really replace, and I empathize for the high school students who are looking to begin or are beginning their post-high school experiences in the same climate.

District 113 recently made the difficult but necessary decision to adopt a primary online posture for the coming school year. Having experienced online coursework firsthand, I know that it is no replacement for the in-person experience. Personally, this felt true even for classes that I expected to transition more easily to online learning: such as computer science and programming. As the beginning of the academic year comes closer, many comparisons will be made between what students could have learned and could have done just a year ago and what is possible now, but these comparisons should be made in the light that the educational landscape for students, parents and educators alike *cannot* and *should* not be equivalent to a normal year. Given the current state of the virus in the US it would be irresponsible to believe otherwise.

However, I do not think as a community we have to simply accept the shortcomings of online instruction, tell students to wear a mask, social distance and then move on. Now is the time for creative solutions in order to supplement students' online curriculum.

To me, this means adapting curriculum and redirecting resources that would have normally been allocated to the student body: such as, assembly performance, and athletic funds to provide educational experiences we might not expect in a normal year. Below is a brainstorm of a few such ideas.

- Organize low barrier-to-entry socially distant or individual community

service activities such as cleaning trails, beaches or parks.

- Match high school to middle and elementary school students for one-on-one remote tutoring
- Partner with community leaders and professionals to create a remote career shadowing program
- Create an on call high school "delivery core" which could pickup and drop off groceries to elderly or low-income individuals who may not have access to commercial delivery services
- Provide creative students structure and organization to preform socially distant presentations outside of nursing homes or similar locations where they could be viewed by residents through their windows
- Form an online committee that primarily includes high school students and ask them to come up with similar ideas

Highland Park High School has had a long reputation of preparing students for college. As many students begin their applications this year, colleges will have to be understanding of the limited opportunities available, but they will also be looking for creative individuals who took advantage of school and community programs or organized their own in order to make the most of an extremely strange academic year. The community now has the chance to provide the foundation for these opportunities.

I understand that it is easy to list off ideas and difficult to organize, navigate bureaucratic systems and mitigate issues of liability. The list above are simply suggestions of student-driven alternative educational opportunities we as a community could work to provide for students who have been swept up in a very-before-scene educational climate.

A successful school year for Highland Park students will not only require exceptional effort but exceptional creativity from all levels of our community. A good place to start may simply be sincerely asking "Who has ideas? Who wants to help?".

-Ethan Holleman

eholleman12@gmail.com
847-922-5317