

## How the pandemic has robbed me of a full high school experience

*With the rituals of field trips, sports and spirit days gone, what's really the value of in-person schooling?*

For seven hours a day, five days a week, I sit at the same desk staring at the lime green walls of my classroom. To manage COVID-19 exposures, each grade stays in its own classroom and the teachers cycle through. I no longer get to stop at my locker, a simple act that I took for granted before the pandemic.

I'm in Grade 11, normally an exciting time for students marked with field trips, sports and school spirit days.

Instead, to reduce COVID-19 transmission, most athletics and trips are suspended. My high school experience has been reduced to notes, worksheets and tests. Now I worry the pandemic has robbed me of something you can't learn from a textbook: the chance to grow as a person and form lifelong connections.

School is supposed to be my social hub as a teenager, but COVID-19 has made my bubble a lot smaller.

I go to a small independent school, and regulated entry times mean I see a handful of people each day in the hallway. I spend most of my day interacting with my grade made up of seven students. We've grown close through the pandemic. Our talks range from politics to the type of bread that best represents us — moments that have been highlights of my days. But new friendships have been hard to come by.

Those lost connections have made me more introverted. I've been careful when seeing people outside my bubble, unsure of whether they've been in close contact with COVID-19. Over Christmas break, I turned down skiing with friends because Omicron cases were rising. Now I worry I won't know how to interact when my bubble expands. How will I navigate a university class of 300 students in less than two years?

The pandemic has also robbed me of experiences to learn outside the classroom.

Travel was a reason I chose my school, including a Grade 10 trip to Peru that would

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have let us volunteer at a non-profit home for boys and experience the Peruvian culture and landscape. I spent hours learning Spanish for the trip and having it cancelled was a big letdown.

On top of that, the science experiments and field trips that I watched the older kids do a few years ago aren't allowed anymore. Without these special moments, the days feel like they blend together.

Getting older means more freedom, but even that's been taken away. It was once normal to explore downtown Fernie with my friends. Now, it's discouraged to leave at lunch, and it's not worth the effort to plan with friends and get parental notes.

When I do leave my desk, it's to walk to the nearest washroom five metres outside our classroom. These fleeting moments are when I feel I have the most freedom.

Still, I understand why I have to follow these protocols. They work, and so far, I haven't missed a day of class. I know many students have done schooling online, so I'm grateful to have spent the pandemic in person with my teachers.

As restrictions ease, I'm more optimistic my last year of high school will be better. But even with masks gone, I think it will be a long transition to pre-pandemic schooling. My hope is that by the time I start university, I'll get to study at the library, live in residence and go to cafes with new friends.

Has high school been the best time of my life? It's something we often hear growing up as we're promised our first taste of freedom and independence. The pandemic has taken that away from me.

Instead, what I'll remember most about my high school years are my classroom's lime green walls.

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