

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Jacob Gregg. Before I get started, I'd like to take a moment to thank Senator Brenner who invited me here to speak. He has been kind enough to take the time to listen, educate, and encourage me and I truly appreciate that.

I'm here this morning to appeal to you to give back something that was taken from me: my senior year. I, along with 108,000 other Ohio High School seniors, were 2020 Juniors when COVID caused the nationwide quarantine. We lost spring sports, prom, academic competitions, volunteer opportunities such as Special Olympics, Our Night to Shine prom, Repair Affair, and of course in-person learning. Over the summer, things only continued to worsen. Student athletes like myself were prevented from visiting college campuses, attending camps, showcases and combines in hopes of getting the attention of a college scout. We couldn't even get together to train with friends. Gyms were closed. Heck, I couldn't even get a haircut! Church camps were cancelled, apprenticeship programs were discontinued. AP classes, taking the ACT, ... the list goes on and on. When school began in the fall, there was some hope that things might return to normal, but we were not so lucky.

I am not too proud to admit that I am dangerously close to failing my senior year of high school. At the onset of COVID, my GPA was a respectable 3.8. Now? I'm barely hanging in there with a 2.1. Have you ever tried to teach yourself Calculus? How about Anatomy? Government? What about a foreign language? I don't recommend it. Many times, I would log on to class, only to find an empty "classroom". Numerous times, there were "technical difficulties" which would either shut off the class prematurely, or prevent us from connecting at all. Even though we live in a very computer dependent, social media driven world, no one, especially a high school student, should have to rely solely on a computer to meet their basic educational needs. As the school year progressed, so did my anxiety and frustration, and the faster my gpa began to drop. And I'm fortunate enough to have wifi, a laptop, and a quiet place to study. How many students lack those things? Low income or underprivileged students might not even have the opportunity to learn.

My hopes for senior year were to make memories, enjoy time with family and friends... not battle what has become almost constant stress and anxiety as to whether or not I'll be able to graduate, or ever get to play football again. And I'm not alone.

Mike Abraham, District Director of Hilliard City schools said in an article in the *Marietta Times*: "schoolchildren today are already more anxious than most before the pandemic. Factor in social isolation, the loss of rites of passage like crowded football fields or prom; the disconcerting psychological effects of being surrounded by people in masks and more? It's a lot for kids to navigate. It's a lot for adults, including myself." This statement came after he saw a fourfold increase in hospitalizations due to mental health issues during the pandemic.

Eben Dowell, Senior Research Analyst at the Ohio Dept. of Education, said at a recent meeting, "Since the pandemic, Ohio has seen a significant rise in the percentage of high schoolers who report feeling sad or hopeless for an extended period, and that's something now experienced by one third of all students."

In a recent social media post, The Columbus YMCA stated that 9 out of 10 school districts haven't seen reduced student proficiency this year.

A quick google search brings up article after article in which educators, psychologists, and others substantiate the fact that quarantine and COVID 19 have taken a major toll on the students of Ohio. We will have lost 4-8 months of learning by the end of this school year. And I keep hearing terms like "collateral damage, and "long-term effects we have no way of determining". I don't want to be a statistic! I don't want to end up in a medical journal and have powers that be play fast and loose with my future. It isn't fair to me, or the other seniors, to simply be shuffled through and hope for the best? Not when there are legislators who have within their grasp the power to do something tangible and beneficial for us.

What I'm asking for today, is for someone in this committee or other legislative body to introduce a bill that would give 2021 seniors the option of returning to school and repeating their senior year, and considering 2020 a "supplemental year". This bill would look similar to Ky SB 128, authored by Senator Max Wise. In Kentucky, the bill passed almost unanimously, with only 5 "no" votes. If you are unfamiliar with SB 128, allow me to give you an overview.

As I said, the bill allows for a repeat of 2020, and students would "reclassify" as 2022 graduates. Classes from this school year would be repeated or supplemented at the school's discretion. It would also allow each district to decide to approve or decline participation in the bill. As for athletes? It makes no concession for age limits or rules in that regard, but it DOES allow student athletes to come back and participate in sports for which they are age eligible. In Ohio? It would simply mean the OHSAA would keep the same "20 year" age rule.

Is this bill for everyone? Of course not. Some kids did just fine with virtual learning. Many don't have the desire to repeat another year of high school. But many others do. And I am one of them.

Those who oppose a bill of this type have said things like "there will be too many kids choosing to repeat, and it will cause overcrowding in schools. To that, I offer these numbers:

There are currently 108,000 high school Seniors in Ohio. There are 1,360 high schools. It is estimated, based on the numbers seen in Ky., that only appx. 2% of students (2,160) would choose to do this. If that is the case, that rounds out to only about one to two kids per high school; clearly not a cause for concern about overcrowding or budget concerns. The other comments I've heard were negatively directed toward athletes. It's almost as if there is a stigma for being an athlete who wants to come back and better his or her chances for even a partial scholarship, or even just the joy of playing one more year of the sport they love.

Speaking for myself? After competing for and earning the starting quarterback position at Wheelersburg High School, I couldn't wait to run onto the field at Ed Miller stadium to a packed house full of fans. Celebrate with my team, work out together in the weight room, and enjoy all the traditions and events associated with senior year. Instead? We played a reduced schedule to only a handful of fans allowed at each game. We didn't even get to have a banquet at the end of our season. And for the record, sports DOES matter. There are about 350,000 high school athletes playing in various sports. "Well, only 2% go on to earn scholarships" I've heard it said. Well, that rounds out to 7,000 kids. I bet it's important to them and their families just as much as a student who received scholarship money for academics! Sports also isn't just about

scholarships. For a lot of kids, their team is their family. It's their escape from horrible situations at home. It's a way out. My dad used to tell me, "It's not about the X's and O's, it's about the Jimmys and Joes. Shelby Co. football coach said it best when he said, "The Shaming of kids taking advantage of SB 128 is ridiculous. It's not about the big D1 athletes. It's about the kids that can come back and improve ACT scores, fix grades, take more dual credit and prepare for their future and life after athletics!!"

To add insult to injury, the NCAA has extended another year of eligibility to its current Division 1, 2, 3 athletes. All current NAIA fall and winter sports athletes, and all current NJCAA athletes. This take an already crowded playing field, so to speak, and makes it even more difficult. It greatly reduces roster spots, scholarship money, housing availability, jobs off campus, and competition within the transfer portal against older, more experienced athletes. So, whether you're a student athlete or a student who excels more in the classroom? We have all been denied the right to have a "normal" senior year.

I have contacted numerous representatives, members of this committee... basically anyone I can find who will hear me out. I can't begin to say how much I appreciate Senator Brenner, Jay Edwards, Mike Loychick, Gary Click, Brett Hillyer, Brian Baldrige, Dontavius Jarrels, Sara Carruthers, Andrea White, and so many others who took the time to speak with me and voice their support. Even Superintendent DeMaria said during the Senate Education Committee meeting that I should be able to come back next year. His aide spoke with my mother and stated that Mr. DeMaria would fully support anything that would further insure the potential for success of Ohio's students.

Again, I understand this type of bill won't be for everyone. But it is definitely for kids like me. I am very very unprepared for college. I'm man enough to admit it. I've heard it said that you don't know what you have until it's gone. I have definitely seen the truth in that statement due to all the things COVID took. What I once took completely for granted and did without a second thought, I'm now fighting to get back. I want to sit in a classroom full of my friends. I want to take written tests, and sit in the cafeteria. I want to see the Friday Night Lights and my family and friends in the stands. I want to sit in church with my family, and sit through a three hour banquet. I want to escort a girl to Homecoming and Prom and dance and laugh and enjoy every single moment of it. In short, I want my senior year back, and I stand before you today pleading for you to help me. Thank you so much for your time and attention, and for considering this request.