mask the impact

The nation's rush to normalcy post lockdown.

story by julia perian

Hungry for normalcy, Americans seem content to throw their masks away and never look back. However, the echoes of this global pandemic still ring. Four years later, the long-lasting impacts of 2020 are less facile to ignore.

This year, Fairview welcomes a new freshman class, and the freshmen who experienced lockdown are now graduating seniors. Thus, COVID-19 and its impacts are still ever-prevalent.

On a more perceptible level, the pandemic significantly set back students academically.

"I feel like I'm a whole year behind in math. I didn't learn anything online," said Lilly Surface (12).

"COVID had a big impact on my learning and understanding with studying for tests and keeping my grades up," said India Grayson (11). "During 7th and 8th grade, I just completely let my grades slip because school was online. So, when I got to high school, I lost all of my study skills and my effort in school."

Counselor Michelle Friend speaks on the root of this skill gap.

"In middle school, most kids learn how to interact socially, how to go through friend issues, how to deal with conflicts, and how to study. And when they came here not having that a lot of them lacked those study and organizational skills," said Friend.

Further, these academic struggles seem to exacerbate already increasing mental health issues among students.

Mental Health Advocate Tess Amer said "Students seem like they are more likely to get overwhelmed by their amount of school work now then they were before."

The rush to return back to 'normal' inflames the cycle of stress even further.

"Some teachers are like -- 'we're back, we need to be back,' whatever that is. And now kids feel like [they] can't keep up at all in school, because there's so much being asked of [them]," added Amer.

Continuing on this idea, Behavior Advocate Zachary Depledge said, "[The pandemic] threw people into video game addiction and social media addiction. They created their own alternate reality to cope."

The "alternative reality" mindset of students manifested poorly in the return to pre-COVID learning. "Then when it came back time to go back to school, they felt they weren't ready, which then increased anxiety, increased real depression, and nobody wants to be back to normal," added Depledge.

Many teachers understand the damage of this dialogue.

"Understanding how the pandemic specifically impacted students and then trying to be able to first understand that and then second be supportive of that is important," said history teacher Salvatore Triolo. "Some examples would be recognizing how students are struggling in being able to interact with each other and being able to have timeliness work completion, and then try to understand the issues and then figure out how to best be supportive in my class and outside of class."

The toll the pandemic took on students spans far beyond stress over study skills. The strain of isolation and its corresponding emotional struggles was difficult for the entire world, let alone teens sensitive to change and loneliness.

"What does isolation do?" asked Depledge. "It causes depression, and if you're sitting in depression, it's comfortable."

While isolation kept students away from disease, it also separated them from their friends and their stability.

"COVID definitely put a setback on my mental wellbeing, because I felt really isolated. Especially when it was really bad, I felt like I was closed off from the world," said Grayson.

Across classes, current Fairview students experienced isolation and virtual learning in fifth-ninth grade. Subsequently, many students' mental health and social skills have been permanently altered due to missing out on critical developmental years

"I think that everybody who went to school during COVID is two years behind… socially and emotionally. Because, when you're not at school, and it's all online, you're not forced to deal with face to face conflict or have interpersonal dialogue, therefore you don't have to learn it," said Depledge.

"[Students] don't know how to sit in that discomfort and work through it together, and so now they seek out other isolation, like blocking people," Depledge continued.

Coupled with the lack of developmental social functioning skills, lockdown's impediment on connection is difficult for many students.

"Freshman year is a big part of high school and meeting everyone, and those first couple months are a really prominent part of your high school career, and having to wear masks for so long put a block between a lot of the new students for the first half of freshman year," said Grayson.

This sentiment is shared by this year's senior class.

Michelle Aguirre(12) said, "We didn't really have the whole high school experience, because we didn't have a freshman year. It was hard having to do freshman things as a sophomore."

"I feel like because of COVID, our senior class isn't as close as we should be. Everyone has their own little group, and when it comes down to senior events, nobody wants to go, because either their friend group isn't going, or they don't know anybody else," she added.

The urge to rush into normalcy, to return to what's comfortable, is understandable. However, COVID was an event so colossal that it changed all aspects of society, and attempting to plunge into a pre-pandemic world is unrealistic.

Not only is it unrealistic, the magnetism of normality can also affect students' mental health. "Like with any mental health struggle, it takes skills and desire to overcome and get unstuck, and to tell everybody that it's back to normal takes away from that. It's invalidating -- everyone is going to get through this at their own pace and their own speed," said Depledge.

Instead of focusing on how to go backwards, we must instead try to move forward, creating a new sense of 'normal' for a world that has been changed permanently and drastically.