



Southside High School

2361 SCHOOL DRIVE
SOUTHSIDE, ALABAMA 35907

12 August, 2020

Dear Parents & Students,

In January of this year, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). I know many people do not know much about this disease, so first, I want to tell you that it is NOT contagious.

As an educator, I try my best to explain things as clearly and as simply as possible. The best explanation I can give is this: Have you ever had a speaker wire that has the plastic coating damaged and the speaker no longer works correctly? That is what my brain is doing. The “plastic coating” on my nerves, called myelin, is being destroyed by my own body, and my nerves no longer communicate properly with my body. MS is an autoimmune disease; this means that my body thinks my protective myelin is a foreign body trying to harm me, so my body is constantly trying to destroy it. That is where modern medicine comes into play.

In June of this year, I began undergoing infusion treatment for my MS. The medication is called Ocrevus. The great thing about this medication is that it essentially tricks my body into thinking the myelin coating on my nerves is safe, and my body stops trying to attack it. The downside of this medication is that it is a disease modifying therapy (DMT), and it makes my immune system weak. Ocrevus depletes my B cells, which helps my body fight off infections.

While every person has infection fighting cells, called T cells and B cells, when one type of these cells is not present because of DMTs, the person is more vulnerable to any number of infections. That is where I am right now: My B cells are building back up, and I have to be especially careful that I do not expose myself to too many germs. When my B cells are restored, which takes about six months, I have another infusion, which kills the B cells all over again.

My neurologist has reluctantly agreed to allow me to continue teaching; her primary recommendation is that every person who is in my room wears a mask. I have a sneeze barrier in my room that runs the entire length of a wall. My podium, desk, and work tables are all behind this barrier. Even after the threat of COVID-19 is over, flu season will begin. In a nutshell, I will likely be wearing my mask and teaching from behind my barrier for the remainder of my teaching career.

Masks are currently required in classrooms, according to the state mask mandate. When the mask mandate expires, my ability to continue teaching will be greatly impacted if students could continue wearing masks while they are in my room. Thank you for your consideration and for your understanding. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at rachael_couch@ecboe.org.

Very sincerely yours,

Rachael Couch