For me, it was as if the pandemic began 2 years ago when I found myself in a new country, the United States. I had just finished my last year of education in Poland and moved from there as soon as the summer break started. On one hand, I was sad to leave behind my familiar reality, but on the other, I was filled with excitement for my new life and impatient for the new school year to begin, so that I could start adapting and making new friends. Little did I know, that would not go as planned.

Because of confusion around translating my Polish classes and grades into the American system, I was not accepted to a private school my parents wanted me to enroll in. For a long time, I didn't get enrolled in a public school either. My parents thought that I couldn't freely choose which public school to apply to but was assigned to a specific one. It was located in a dangerous area and for my safety, they didn't want me to attend there. Eventually, I enrolled in a cyber school as a temporary solution. Finally, in the middle of the year, I transferred to my current school that I was able to attend in person. Although my first month there was challenging, mostly due to anxiety caused by the change, I felt that things finally began to fall in place. After that time, I began to get used to the new environment and my fears were slowly subsiding. But just when I thought that I had finally recovered normalcy, the pandemic hit and snapped it away from me. Since I moved two years ago, I have received only around a month and a half of in-person education.

"If we were in school, we would make good friends" is what one girl said to me. However, we were not in school, and thus our conversation died off pretty quickly. During these two years, I came to realize how intertwined education and friendships are. Schools open the doors to meeting new people, and in return, connections with others help our learning. Online education made it much harder to make new friends at school, as well as lowered the amount of interaction we have with them throughout the day. That can affect our ability to absorb new information in many ways. For one, if we discuss what we learned with others, the information needs to be recalled and used, which helps us memorize it. If we only keep the information to ourselves, we might fail to connect it to other events in our lives and it might become irrelevant. We remember what we use. Moreover, what is the benefit of knowledge if we only keep it to ourselves? We can improve much more if we share it. Discussing information with others allows them to express their opinions and add to our understanding in unexpected ways. This helps us develop our ideas further. We not only remember and use the information, but we also learn to think about it critically, see it from different angles, and form our opinions on it. For the last two years, I have personally experienced the lack of these benefits. Since I had fewer opportunities to share what I learned, it started to seem less important and my abilities to relate it to other information decreased. I feel like I missed out on a lot of growth I could have undergone if I went through the learning with others.

This disconnection seems to me to be the driving force behind other changes that came with the pandemic. As the school year continued, I noticed my teachers becoming more and more exhausted by teaching over zoom. They started moving away from what a semblance of face-to-face (camera-to-camera) education we had. One teacher began periodically recording himself teaching the lesson and then sharing it with his other classes so that he didn't have to teach the same material multiple times. It seemed like my teacher didn't have motivation, so it made me lose some of my motivation too. There was also no form of verification if the students watched the lesson. It was entirely up to us how much to watch or if we want to watch it at all.

While we could email the teacher with questions, the valuable opportunity to ask them as the teacher goes through the lesson was lost. For these reasons, it is a change I hope to not see when we go back to in-person learning.

Another teacher moved to project-based learning, in which we were given a big assignment and a week or two to work on it during class time. While our tasks were properly designed to encourage creative thinking, this form of learning further strengthened the wall between us and our teacher. We were essentially left on our own, with very little supervision. However, this type of learning is something that I believe could be beneficial to education if done correctly. I think we should sometimes replace teaching through lectures with teaching through projects when we go back to in-person learning, as the physical proximity to the students we work with and to the teacher can foster a supportive environment, instead of further isolation, as it was in a virtual environment.

My education experience during the pandemic and the year before can be summarized by one word - separation. Separation from peers, teachers, as well as from engaging education and ability to share knowledge and grow. However, I hope that with the comeback of in-person learning, we will see more engagement from the teachers, combined with a greater sense of understanding for hard personal situations some students might find themselves in and increased flexibility. What I learned is: we can't thrive if there is a disorder in our personal lives, and we can't thrive if there is a lack of involvement from our teachers and peers.