

July 13, 2020

I am a 3rd and 4th grade special education teacher in Eastern Kentucky.

When I first began hearing of “COVID-19” I didn’t think it would reach our mountains. I was naïve in my thoughts of this quickly passing without impacting our small town. Even when our schools were forced to shut down, I held fast to my hope that this would be temporary and end without stealing many lives but unfortunately that has not been the case.

Leaving my classroom in March of 2020 was difficult. Everything escalated so quickly that I didn’t get to say goodbye to my very first class. I didn’t get a class picture. I didn’t get to see the completion of goals that we worked on for months. I didn’t get to tell them how proud I am of them for their hard work or attention. I didn’t get to thank them for teaching me how to be a teacher. At that time, I was angry and saddened and felt robbed of my first year as a teacher but I had hope that I would be able to do at least some of these things when we returned to school.

In the meantime, we offered online instruction which wasn’t much help to many of my students as they do not have internet access at home. I called my students and their parents once a day, five days a week for two months. My fellow educators and I delivered meals to families in need, created and delivered work packets, and gave our personal phone numbers to every parent and guardian in hopes that they would reach out to us with any other needs they had. Even with schools shut down, we worked, worried, and prayed for our students. During this time, I learned a lot about my students, their parents, and their home lives, which only increased my desire to return to school.

It is now July and my district is working on a reopening plan for September. I was hoping this would be a happy, exciting time for me and my students but instead it is filled with worry, fear, and anxiety. Educators and administrators are being asked to strike an

impossible balance between keeping our students healthy and educating them and we will walk this line because it is our job and because teachers are known for doing the impossible. Every educator I know is rising to the challenge and putting in the work to ensure our students' needs are met, academically and otherwise but that doesn't mean we aren't scared.

I am scared of losing my students to the illness that has already taken so many lives, to tragic home situations, to a mindset of fear and anxiety, to poverty and to ignorance. I'm scared that our reopening plan has too many gaps and that there is no realistic way to fill them. I'm scared that this will be our new normal and that life as we know it has changed forever.

Our reopening plan says that all decorations must be removed from the hallways, all staff and students must wear face masks, everyone must remain 6 feet apart, students can't change classes or eat lunch together, and students can't trade books with one another or share a bus seat. Instead of returning to hugs, smiles, color, and fun, our students will come back to face masks, thermometers, white walls, and teachers who can't hold their hands. I understand why these guidelines are necessary and I'm glad that we are taking steps to ensure that no child gets sick while in our care. I'm also very grateful that my students and I are planning to return to one another at all, but the fear, worry and frustration tends to override my thankful heart.

I understand that our school and state leaders are doing their best to make this work and that because of that effort most students in my district will survive this pandemic and move on with an adequate education, good enough that the gaps can be filled in later on with little lasting effects and good memories of being allowed to stay at home with their families, but there are some students that won't fare so well.

Those students are my students. My students are the children who suffer from auto-immune diseases that dramatically lessen their chances of survival if infected with COVID-19. My students are the children who were already delayed because of an education or judicial system that failed them, a tragic family situation, an out of place chromosome, or a brain that isn't wired quite like the rest. These students will come out of this pandemic further behind academically, socially, and emotionally, further traumatized and more excluded than they were before despite the efforts of their doctors, teachers, administrators, social workers, and friends. My heart physically aches for these students. The COVID-19 pandemic will claim many more victims than the numbers of deceased read on the nightly news.

Despite my worries and fears, the people of Eastern Kentucky have proven time and time again to be persistent, driven, optimistic and strong in the face of poverty, tragedy and illnesses and I believe that these communities will continue to support one another, support our children and do everything in our power to protect ourselves and our neighbors. I'm deeply saddened at the loss of lives, careers, time with beloved family members and missed memories but I and my fellow educators look forward to our new "normal" and time with our students, whether it be online or in face masks, and we will continue to do everything we can to ensure the education and safety of the children of Eastern Kentucky.