Back to School in COVID Time: An Interview with a Terrified New York Teacher

By Josh Bloom — August 2, 2020

Stephanie S. (not her real name) is a teacher in New York City. She is facing some difficult, perhaps even impossible, choices. Will she return to the classroom, where COVID will surely spread? Or refuse to do so, and lose her a job and health insurance? What about remote teaching or a so-called "hybrid model?" Here are her thoughts.

What to do?

Stephanie S. (not her real name) has been teaching at a pre-K through 8th-grade Catholic school in New York City for more than five years. Although the school is run by the Archdiocese of New York, it closely follows the health guidelines set forth by the NYC Board of Education. Archdiocese school teachers belong to the Federation of Catholic Teachers Association union.

Her concern is the same as that of teachers all across the US who are terrified to return to school and are worried about losing their jobs if they don't. She's been reading ACSH's coverage of COVID-19 and reached out looking for some guidance. What should she do? What's the right answer?

Unfortunately, there is no answer, at least not a good one. For example, one day after it opened a student in Greenfield Central Junior High School in Indiana tested positive. Now they have a
giant mess on their hands. Every student that had close contact with the student (as if that's so easy to tell) now faces a 14-day quarantine.

Stephanie generously agreed to answer some questions about the difficult situation she faces.

How do you and your colleagues feel about returning to the classroom next month?

*My colleagues and I are all very nervous about going back. We worry about our health, exposing our families, and the health of the students and their families. I dare to say that no one is excited to go back to the classroom and I do not think anyone has high hopes of this hybrid model lasting past September. We are all aware that NYC is the only large school district that meets the metric to open. This is not reassuring.*

How many teachers do you think will refuse to return? Will you?

*This is tricky. As far as I know, everyone is planning to return to school. I am also planning to return. However, I think people are still weighing their options and many will not decide until the end of the month.*

How will administrators handle teachers who refuse to return?

*If we choose to not return (we do not have the option to be fully remote teachers) we will need a doctor’s note citing a health reason for not returning. We will have to use all our banked sick days and then we will be transitioned to long term disability. After six months we will lose our health coverage. Many of us are worried that we would not be hired back next year if we do opt to do this.*

At this time there are two choices, both bad. There can be little doubt that the virus will be spread in schools. Maybe by a lot. On the other hand, remote learning has its own set of issues; parents unable to go to work because of childcare and children being stuck at home in front of a screen all day. Which choice is worse?

*There are no good options here. I can’t imagine getting to know a new class remotely, but I think it is a safer option. I would absolutely choose to start the year remotely because anyone who follows the science knows that this is a safer option for everyone. Also, we are educators with master’s degrees. We are not daycare workers or babysitters. I understand that parents need to get back to work, but how are two out of five days in the classroom going to solve this issue? It won’t.*

What are your thoughts about online learning? Can it be effective?
Online learning will never be as effective as in-person learning. It is a stop-gap solution to try to cope with this pandemic. I can say with certainty that every educator in my school has been working all summer to improve their best practices in teaching remotely.

“Hybrid” solutions – a mix of part-time classroom and online time have been proposed in several cities, including New York. What are your thoughts on this?

The hybrid solution keeps me up at night. I am so overwhelmed and I do not know how I will be able to sustain the number of hours it will require to make this work. This is the model we are being asked to implement and I worry that it will be a disaster! I think all in the school or all remote are the only viable choices.

NYC has a positivity rate of about 1%. Mayor de Blasio announced that schools will close if that number reaches 3%. [3] This seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy. What do you think of this plan?

I am skeptical that we will make it through the middle of September and remain under 3%. I don’t want anyone to get sick, but sadly, I find myself wishing we reach 3% before the end of August, and go to an all-remote model. I find it arrogant of New York to think that we will not be in the same position as New Jersey in the coming weeks.

Any other thoughts?

My only other thought is why our governor (who up to now I have been madly in love with) thinks that this is a good idea [4]. We are all scared for sure!

Stephanie, thanks for taking the time to speak with me. All the best during a very difficult time.

COVID is very far from being under control. Now, take Stephanie's story and multiply it by 3.7 million – the number of teachers in the US. Many of them will be forced to make a choice. What will you do?

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