

Thank you for your time today. My hope for today is to help you understand what the past several months have been like for educators. While my story and opinions are mine alone, I believe that many of the things I have and am experiencing are similar to the experiences of others.

I am a ten year veteran teacher who teaches special education at Main Street Middle School, a 5-8 school here in Montpelier. As you might expect, when our district first shut down because of Covid last March, things were chaotic. All of us had to quickly scramble and create plans to teach in a way we had never taught before. As a special educator, I was particularly concerned about how I would meet the needs of my intensive needs students in a virtual environment. Further, I knew it would be difficult to get some of my students to sign on for a virtual lesson.

When virtual learning began, there were successes and challenges for me. I am the father of a four year old daughter and a two year old son. My wife and I had to balance both of our working lives with our parenting lives. As you might expect, this was not easy. As I expected, it was hard to get some students to sign in on the computer due to a variety of circumstances. Many times, I would sign into a scheduled session and just wait. Nobody ever came. Families had a variety of reasons why some of these sessions couldn't work, ranging from having to work and not being able to force their middle schoolers to sign or to other responsibilities the children had at home. All of my student's families were doing the best that they could. Then there was the paperwork. Special educators were asked to complete distance learning plans related to students' IEPs. Due to changing directives or lack of clarity from the AOE, I had to revise these three separate times, which ate up hours of my time.

This is not to say that there weren't also some big successes. Early on, I identified some math software online that my students could use every day. I could look at their progress and teach live lessons with a virtual white board to make sure they understood new concepts. One of my students in particular seemed to make more progress in this format than he had been in school. I learned quickly how to teach a virtual writing lesson and monitor student's progress. This group was soon able to function similarly to how it did at school. The work was gruelling and there was little home/work balance but we got through it. My colleagues went through a similar process. We realized early on that we were initially assigning far too much, overwhelming our students. A weekly schedule was developed with clear expectations for each day and assignments that were due by the end of the week. I was truly amazed at what some of my colleagues were able to put together. There is much that we've learned about virtual learning that we can use next year to make the experience even better should we need to go there.

The 2019-2020 school year is over, but I don't feel like I've stopped working at all this summer. As a leader in my local union and a teacher leader in my building I have been heavily involved in

reopening planning. In Montpelier/Roxbury our administrative team is taking a collaborative approach to planning. A large group of us has been meeting weekly in person since just after the 4th of July and other building specific meetings have occurred with teachers and administrators. We've walked through buildings and looked at rooms, discussed which bathrooms which classes should use, and set separate entrances for different classes, among other things. Our administrators in Montpelier Roxbury are doing an admirable job keeping safety at the forefront while trying to meet the needs of students, teachers, and families. I am not sure when they are sleeping.

That said, plans for reopening remain fraught with problems and unanswered questions. Everyone would rather be teaching in person, but with the virus out of control nationally, the majority of the teachers I speak with are scared that this is not safe. Teachers feel like our lives and our student's lives will be on the line and we still don't have answers to some basic questions. What will we do if a student gets sick? Don't know, we're supposed to call the Department of Health. What will we do if too many teachers are high risk or have childcare problems and can't work? Don't know. Do we have the staff to pull this off safely? Not sure. Will the virus make its way back up the I-95 corridor and render these plans moot? Who knows. Nobody can seem to give us a straight answer for something as simple as whether window fans are OK. Not knowing the answer to these questions is uncomfortable with school mere weeks away and the stakes as high as they are. I have trouble sleeping most nights.

I want to make clear that none of these unanswered questions are the fault of my local administrators. While I am a believer in local control, I can't help but think that some of this uncertainty could have been avoided by more centralized guidance, created with all stakeholders at the table. Specific to special education, while some guidance on compensatory services and special education evaluations was released the other day, I am still not really clear on the best way to provide special education services when we're trying to minimize mixing groups across the school. I also don't know how to meet the needs of special education students that have behavioral disabilities in this environment. How will 1:1 paraprofessionals work with their students? Perhaps there is still time to put our heads together and solve these problems. Right now we are short on time and short on answers and it's creating a whole lot of anxiety in the field.