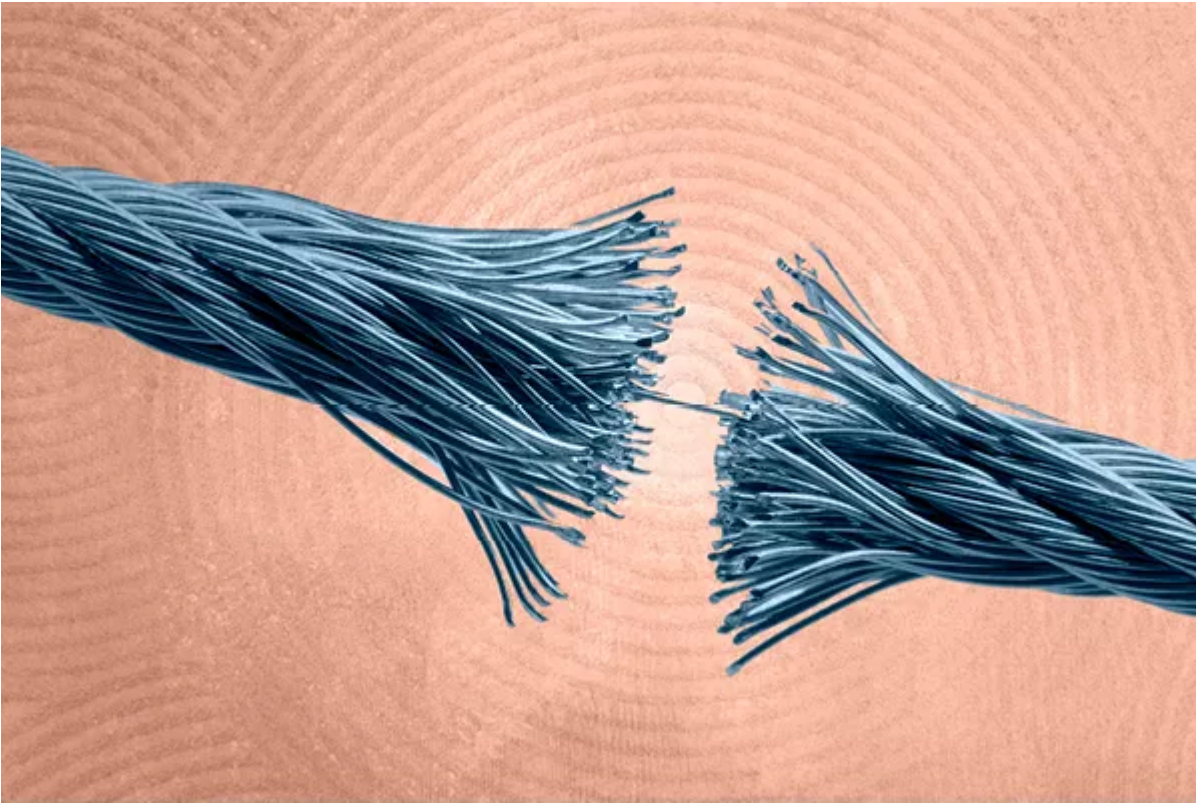


Forget Self-Care for Teachers. We Are Fighting for Our Lives



—Getty and Vanessa Solis/Education Week

By **Justin Minkel**

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When teachers chose to give our lives to teaching, this wasn't what we had in mind.

We knew we'd work long hours for low pay. We knew we'd navigate damaging policies crafted far from the world of the classroom.

We never anticipated being told to report to work in conditions that could sicken or kill us by politicians far removed from the risks and realities of our schools.

Across a nation with so many COVID-19 hot spots they're starting to bleed together, teachers have had very little say on two critical questions: when and how to return to face-to-face teaching.

For many teachers facing the imminent return to school, the customary combination of nerves and excitement has been replaced by mortal terror.

That fear is far from abstract. In June, **three Arizona teachers** who taught remote lessons from a shared classroom contracted COVID-19. One of them, Kimberly Lopez Chavez Byrd, died.

We all went into teaching prepared to give our days and years to a demanding yet rewarding profession. But asking us to serve as guinea pigs in the most dangerous national experiment ever attempted is a bridge too far.

Cracks Into Canyons

The pandemic has stress-tested every American institution, from our economy to the social fabric

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of our neighborhoods. Washington Post columnist Monica Hesse **wrote in a recent piece on the struggle of working moms:** "The novel coronavirus has put sticks of dynamite into the cracks of our society, turning them into the canyons that must be navigated."

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One of those canyons, the fundamental inequities in our system along lines of race and class, has been ripped wide as COVID-19 ravages communities of color at **wildly disproportionate rates**.

In the region of Arkansas where I teach, **the Latinx community has been hit hard, and half the deaths have been people from the Marshall Islands**—a community that makes up **only 3 percent of our region**.

On the same day that my county saw 199 predominantly Latinx workers in an 1,100-person chicken-processing plant test positive for the virus, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson announced the move to Phase 2 of reopening the state's economy, loosening restrictions as the number of infections surged.

The pandemic's disparate impact, wrought in part by failures of political leadership, has profound implications for the risk of infection posed to teachers who serve children of color living in poverty. Increased risk for these children and their families means greater risk for their teachers as well.

How Much Worse Will the Teacher Exodus Get?

Before the pandemic ever began, teachers had been leaving our profession at alarming rates. **Sixteen percent of teachers leave the classroom every year**, and half the teachers currently in the classroom have considered quitting. Tim Sleskar, the dean of education at Edgewood College in Wisconsin, explains **the distinction between a shortage and an exodus**:

"When we have a shortage, say, of nurses, pay goes up, conditions get better, and enrollment in nursing programs skyrockets. So if we have a teacher shortage, pay would go up. It's not. Conditions would get better. They're not. And enrollment in teacher education would go up. It's declining."

Now we have a return to classrooms still fraught with the risk of infection, via policies enacted often with little input from the teachers who will take on that risk. It doesn't take a prophet to predict a surge in the teacher exodus this school year. **Twelve percent of teachers who had planned to remain in the classroom** are already considering a departure from teaching because of the pandemic, according to an Education Week Research Center survey. If we see a spike in coronavirus cases as schools reopen, that number may rise dramatically.

Treating Symptoms vs. Curing the Disease

Even before the pandemic struck, the push for teacher "self-care" often seemed to address the symptoms of burnout rather than its root causes. The disconnect between prescriptions for self-care and the harsh conditions teachers face can be jarring. In the face of a mortal threat, tips like **"laugh and learn from your mistakes"** and **"find ways to work on and improve your self-image"** seem absurd.

With new infections still surging, our nation has to adequately address **teachers' concerns about whether the return to school will damage their health or even claim their lives**.

So how can we avert another crisis within a crisis, a worsening teacher exodus nested within the global catastrophe wrought by COVID-19? How can school leaders help teachers care for themselves when, more than ever, their lives are on the line?

1. Provide teachers with decision-making power on when and how to resume in-person instruction.

Teachers understand the realities of the classroom. We know what kind of personal protective equipment students and staff will need when they return to face-to-face teaching. We know what's realistic when it comes to social distancing in a kindergarten classroom, as opposed to a middle school.

We can also translate emerging knowledge about the spread of COVID-19 into practice, like planning more instruction outside and designing classrooms so that each student has their own space, distanced from other desks or even surrounded by shower curtains, where they can do their work safely.

Returning to school will inevitably be a fraught proposition. But giving teachers a say in when and how it happens could go a long way toward averting the kind of **massive teacher strike** or exodus that would cripple our school system.

2. Provide options.

One of the laudable responses to the pandemic has been the sensitivity and flexibility shown to families in many school districts. My own district has provided three options for the fall: in-person school, distance learning from home, and a hybrid model in which students attend school in smaller groups two or three days a week.

We need to be equally thoughtful in providing options for teachers. My school district's leaders have offered a humane gift to every teacher in our district: the option to take a year's leave while their job is held for the following year. Many teachers, of course, can't afford a year without pay. But the option to teach virtually or find safer employment for a year could potentially be lifesaving, particularly for those at elevated risk.

3. Proceed with caution.

There's a long history in education of rolling out tests, programs, and policies before they've been adequately researched, developed, and proven. When it comes to reopening schools, we have to base our decisions on research and proven practices, not political talking points or a fevered rush to get the economy rolling at any cost.

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There's plenty of emerging information on how to reopen schools safely when the time is right, from Centers for Disease Control guidance to **successful models in other countries**—for example, opening a limited number of days per week and waiting to reopen until the number of new cases has shown a steady decline. We have to act on that information as we make decisions about when and how to return to in-person school this year.

We have no choice but to get this right. It's a matter of life or death.

Justin Minkel teaches 1st and 2nd grades at Jones Elementary in Springdale, Ark., a high-performing, high-poverty school where 85 percent of the students are English-language learners. A former Teach For America corps member, Minkel was the 2007 Arkansas Teacher of the Year. In his instruction, he is focused on bringing advanced learning opportunities to immigrant and at-risk students. Follow him at [@JustinMinkel](#).