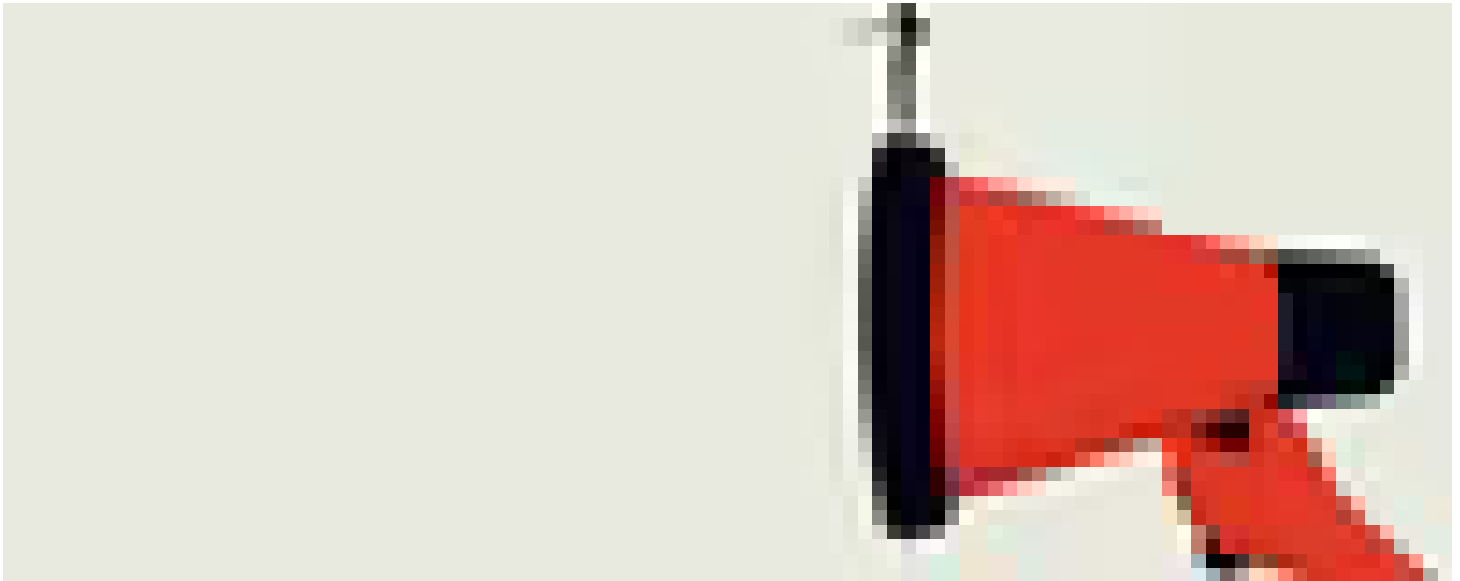


Teachers Have Little Say When School Districts Make Decisions. Here's How We Change That.

By Aisha Douglas

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It was fall 2020, and here I was, sitting at my computer in tears. I had just received a notice from my school about the push for teachers and leaders to return to school for in-person learning. The email highlighted a “hybrid plan” that involved teachers rotating in and out of the building on specific days and periods.

In theory, the rotations were logistically sound. In reality, the plan did nothing to assuage the fears of teachers and families as there could be no certainty that our safety would be guaranteed.

At that moment, I felt frustrated, fearful, and anxious. How would I keep myself and my family safe? What would I do with my children that are on different schedules and attend schools in different neighborhoods? How were these decisions even being made? I was angry that the mayor and district leaders were gambling with the health of

students and my fellow teachers and leaders. They were not going to be stuck in classrooms with minimal ventilation, trying frantically to sanitize surfaces, monitor proper mask placement, and navigate school-wide infections.

And that's the problem. **It's always us.**

That moment sits heavy on my mind because this is not an infrequent occurrence in education. Decisions and policies are often made without the input of teachers and school leaders. The policies and decisions surrounding the COVID pandemic revealed the powerlessness of teachers in the school setting. In moments of crisis, decisions are made without consideration of the impact on educators' mental and physical health. However, the outcome of these decisions is placed solely on the shoulders of the people excluded from the process.

Shifting Roles and Opinions

These days, it is not unusual for teachers to learn about changes to their roles and job responsibilities in these uncertain circumstances at the same time as every other student and parent in their communities. All this while attempting to care for their families and themselves.

None of this is a simple fix, but the lack of consideration and empathy for teachers is doing more damage than in-person or remote learning ever could.

As the heated debate between remote and in-person learning unraveled publicly, I expected a level of outrage in support of educators. I also expected the news outlets to widely criticize the powers that be for the lack of consideration for the safety of our teachers and students. But, instead, the vilest assumptions and insults were circulated like stale air in the same conference rooms where lawmakers meet to decide the fate of educators across the country.

Amid another wave of covid infections, similar sentiments have reemerged in news articles, blog posts, and comment sections. Parents lament the possibility of having to “teach” their children with little consideration of the teachers sitting at their computers well after contracted hours trying desperately to produce engaging and high-quality virtual lessons.

None of this is a simple fix, but the lack of consideration and empathy for teachers is doing more damage than in-person or remote learning ever could. Nearly 10% of teachers in Providence are **retiring or quitting**; in Michigan, there has been a **44% increase** in mid-year teacher retirements; and in Florida, **teacher vacancies** have increased by 67%.

Clearly, we cannot deny the impact of the current climate on teachers. So, where do we go from here?

Inclusive Policy and Strategy

Teacher Policy PodsTo reinvest in our current teachers and inspire future educators to join our diminishing field, we must create stronger systems for collaboration between teachers and families and transparency between policymakers, lawmakers, teachers, and school administrators. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that these suggestions are ambitious, maybe even a bit idealistic. However, we must start somewhere, and our children's current education landscape does not bode well.

One of the most common points of frustration I hear from teachers and school administrators is the lack of input in decisions that impact students, families, and teachers. So often, decisions are made with insufficient knowledge of school resources, such as budget decisions that fail to consider the resources needed to execute mandated curriculum. Teachers could, and should, be included in these types of decisions in dialogue with lawmakers and school stakeholders.

Based on data from the 2018-19 school year, there are approximately **200,000 public school teachers** in New York state. With such a deep and talented pool of educators, we could establish a policy pod that allows teachers to review and provide feedback on policies crafted for schools during this current pandemic – and beyond. In addition, teachers and school administrators have invaluable knowledge when it comes to a school's context and input that could allow for budgets to be allocated more effectively and in the best interest of the students and staff.

Separation of Data and Safety Policies

If nothing is done to show teachers and students that our lives are valued beyond the classroom, the field of education will soon head into a crisis of its own making.

During the pandemic, one of the most overused rationale to defend the return to in-person learning is that students are falling behind because remote learning does not work. Quite frankly, this argument relies on decontextualized data to assess student performance. Tying the student success during this unstable time to teacher performance is both ridiculous and not that simple. There are currently **1,876 schools** within the New York City Department of Education, including 268 charter schools. No two schools are the same. As a mother of two elementary-aged children, I experienced a robust remote experience. Students at other schools did not have the same experience. Reports emerged of schools struggling to secure stable internet connections needed to support student learning. Using this “data” to defend the return to unsafe school buildings creates a narrative that teachers failed during remote learning.

We need to examine and reflect on schools that had positive remote experiences. This is the data that matters. Academic data pulled during a time when families were experiencing deaths of loved ones, illness in the household, a lack of resources exposes data points that have nothing to do with academic skills and demoralizes teachers who

brought the best they could while simultaneously experiencing the same struggles our students faced.

If nothing is done to show teachers and students that our lives are valued beyond the classroom, the field of education will soon head into a crisis of its own making. You cannot deny the humanity, needs, and expertise of the very people charged with caring for our children. Current laws do nothing to acknowledge educators as the backbone of society. Our policies do not display the expertise of the people that *actually execute* this work. Moreover, our policies do not reflect how deeply our children need people who are valued and cared for standing in front of them every day. Change is necessary, and it must happen now.

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