“Teachers say they’re stressed to the point of leaving or even self-harm”

Norfolk, Virginia special education teacher describes in-person teaching conditions

Ed Hightower
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Last month, schools reopened across Virginia under a mandate by Democratic Governor Ralph Northam. In Norfolk Public Schools (NPS), elementary schools reopened on Monday, March 15, followed by middle schools on April 12 and high schools on April 26.

The city of Norfolk has had nearly 17,000 COVID-19 infection and 241 deaths, while the state of Virginia as a whole has seen nearly 650,000 cases and 10,564 deaths. All of these figures are set to increase in the coming weeks and months as a result of the broader reopening of schools and nonessential workplaces well before the pandemic is contained.

This reporter spoke with an NPS Special Education teacher about conditions at her elementary school, which reopened last month. She wished to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions to herself and colleagues.

Ed Hightower: You mentioned how in a Facebook group for Special Ed teachers there were posts about how difficult their conditions are?

Norfolk Teacher: Yes, it’s been very difficult. They warn about “triggers” in their posts, meaning that what they are about to say could be harmful to someone with a history with mental illness. In response to the post, someone commented, “I feel really awful, I’m at the end of my rope. I want to quit, but I am afraid to quit. What are my next steps? I feel very abused by my administration etc.”

I am seeing many posts like this now. A lot of it has to do with the expectations of the hybrid learning model, having students in real time and other students still at home, while not feeling adequately supported and feeling very unprepared. Teachers also feel guilt that they are not doing the best under the circumstance we are all under.

Also, at this time of year there is the additional, I guess *threat*, of high stakes assessments coming up and knowing that for many teachers they are still going to feel the pressure of the results of those assessments. It’s still on our plate, that we are responsible for a particular outcome even for our Special Ed population, and feeling like we’re at a tremendous disadvantage and feeling like no one really cares that we’re at a disadvantage. You’re still required to make a certain amount of progress with your students whether they’re in-person or at home.

EH: I think to a certain extent that was already the case with teachers, where you encountered all of these social ills: malnutrition, abuse or neglect at home, poverty, etc. And teachers were left holding the bag for all of these social ills when it came to standardized test results. But now you are made to be a guarantor of these kids’ progress in this highly novel (to put it mildly) situation.

NT: Right, and when you say novel, that means that there is no road map. So, we’re finding this on our own with very little support from anyone. This is all new for teachers and all we have is each other to lean on and it’s difficult when you hear other teachers say they’re stressed to the point of leaving or even self-harm. I feel, teachers feel there are a lot of fingers pointing at us right now and some of us internalize that and feel a deficiency, whether it is our deficiency or that of society. We feel that we should be solving these issues of injustice and educational gaps, that we should somehow have the ability to solve these crises. I don’t know where we get that, why we shoulder that burden ourselves, I don’t know where that comes from.

EH: What does the “hybrid model” look like for a special Ed teacher?

NT: We’re in the building with students in the classroom, and I call it broadcasting. We’re sitting across from our laptops with the camera in our face talking to the kids at home while simultaneously trying to address the kids who are there in-person. You very quickly forget about social distancing. You very quickly forget that there’s a pandemic

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when there's a child tugging on you because he needs help in real time.

And we're under a lot of pressure to improve our lesson plans, which seems kind of strange to me that at the end of the year there's some sort of deep need from the state of Virginia to improve our lesson plans. It's April, so I am not really understanding where that came from. But there have been several professional development emails sent out to us making sure that we have our lesson plans squared away, and that they look letter perfect. The time to discuss lesson plans is in September, so that we have a primer and a template to work from for the rest of the year, not to re-tool things. I think it must be about high stakes testing because everybody is freaking out. It's coming next month.

EH: Piling the high stakes testing on is absolutely outrageous. What are conditions like in your Special Ed classroom?

I'm in the classroom with a general education teacher, so we're together and it's called inclusion class: two teachers within the same classroom. With the model we have, we have five or six in-person children each day, maybe 9 or 10 at home. Wednesday is our asynchronous day, we put activities and assignments online for the kids but there is no in-person or online class.

EH: How much do the test scores matter, and has it changed during the pandemic?

NT: It is a part of our advancement, at least for the general education teachers. The further up you go the more important it is, like with high school teachers it does bear weight. It's part of our annual goals, which are tied to improving academics test scores. We're supposed to always be thinking about the tests and how we're going to use them to advance student learning. It's always been a big thing, and I think it's interesting that many other states have already decided that they are opting out of the high stakes tests, but not Virginia. Given that we have a Democratic governor I don't understand what his issue is, I mean I think that that would take a huge amount of weight and burden off of everyone.

Parents are allowed to opt their children out of the high stakes testing, but the district frowns on that. It's something that teachers are actually asked not to tell parents they can do, even though it's their legal right. I think they just have to send an email to the principal saying I don't want my child to participate in this year's high stakes testing and it will not affect the child's grades or ability to advance. But we're always cautioned not to inform parents about this.

EH: For the teachers it seems dangerous, for the parents it seems dangerous. It seems like if this call were shared by a rank-and-file committee and on the WSWS it might be popular, something that would galvanize support.

NT: Yes, I think that that would be helpful to get the word out that they can do that. Parents came in in October and brought their children in face-to-face for PALS testing, which is a kindergarten, first grade and second grade assessment. They brought their kids in face-to-face. I don't think parents really know what their rights are, and I think that works against parents.

EH: What is this type of testing, PALS?

NT: For the state of Virginia, it's a phonological awareness assessment. It tests whether or not kids know the alphabet, know the alphabet sounds and understand rhyming. There is a lot of state money tied to the PALS assessment. In October, we were told to invite all of the kindergartners in for face-to-face PALS testing. It was really shocking. Is it really worth our lives? We were told it was tied to state money and reading support for students, but PALS testing can be done online.

EH: How were the tests conducted?

NT: We wore masks and the kids wore masks but that was about it. We were told we would have more safety protocols than we had. We were supposed to have plastic shields and we were supposed to have gloves and stuff. We pretty much had to provide our own masks, like now. We have to provide our own masks for the face-to-face teaching. We weren't given masks from the school.

EH: That seems patently unreasonable, like you're in a coal mine and you don't get a hard hat.

NT: Right, it's bring your own. And we hear different things. When this all started, I thought we would get our own PPE but it's for the kids in case the kids forget it. They have children's masks but not adult masks. So, like good little workers we pay for our own stuff.

EH: have there been any outbreaks at the schools?

NT: They are sending teachers and students home. At our union Zoom call there was discussion about an entire class that got sent home. I'm not certain what's happening with that class and what the end result was.

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