

Teachers are feeling the stress as school reopenings approach

PANDEMIC

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

As school districts scramble to prepare for an unprecedented beginning to the school year next week, teachers across Monroe County are finding themselves at the center of a logistical whirlwind.

They are the ones who will translate district-level planning to actual children in the classroom, whether in-person or remotely.

And yet, in this final chaotic week of summer, teachers are reporting receiving guidance that is ever-changing and sometimes absent altogether.

“Normally at this point we’re all set and ready to go,” said Kate Dobosz, an elementary school teacher in the West Irondequoit district. “(Now) we’re getting new information daily.”

Much of the uncertainty is inevitable as district leaders confront unforeseen challenges. Local, state and federal teacher’s unions point to it as proof that the whole idea of reopening in person is misguided.

“We need to take our time and do

this right,” Andrew Jordan, co-president of the Monroe 1 BOCES United Professionals union, said in a statement earlier this month. “The stakes are too high to rush back to school before the safety of students and staff can be ensured when we have the option of providing remote instruction to students.”

A flurry of details

Not all teachers are hesitant to return to school for health reasons. In interviews, though, several expressed anxiety about how well they can be prepared for the beginning of school.

Mary Beth Arnold, a speech pathologist at RISE Community School in Rochester, said she’s been “inundated with emails” but has not received adequate training or answers to some of her questions, including whether she’s allowed to make visits to students’ homes before the year begins.

“I understand that central office administrators are overwhelmed with orchestrating the switch to online learning,” she said. “Teachers and related service providers are front and center when it comes to providing quality education and supports and students ... (and we’ve) been left out.”

Some amount of turmoil is inevitable in any case. Dobosz said she’s been involved in West Irondequoit’s planning efforts all summer and feels the district has done as good a job as it could so far — but it hasn’t stopped her from getting constant updates on how she’ll be able to run her classroom.

One day earlier this week, it had to do with approved toys for recess. Another day it was protocol for dismissal. She still doesn’t know what sort of containers she’ll be able to use to store items in the room.

“We still have a little time, thank heavens, to figure some of these things out,” she said.

One consequence of the intensive planning and training has been that many teachers have lost their traditional summer vacation — a break they were looking forward to in particular after the hectic spring semester.

“I feel like I have not had a summer vacation because there’s always something: a Zoom meeting, a training, some communication we need to address,” Arnold said. “From that perspective I’m really burned out.”

It is a common feeling for teachers at the moment — and for everyone else, too.

“I’m not optimistic at all,” Arnold said. Still, she concluded: “We’ll do the best we can, because it’s the students’ future we’re dealing with.”

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School classrooms have largely been empty since last spring. GETTY IMAGES

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