

# Frustration builds for students in Rochester family

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Rihanna Sepulveda wakes before her four siblings, sometimes as early as 7 a.m. The seventh-grader at Rochester's Franklin Middle School is "shining bright," her mother says, ready to face the day.

Today, though, Rihanna is in tears.

"I know my grades aren't right," she cries. "They gave me an F!"

Her mother, Zumarie, is shocked. They know Rihanna has completed the work. She tries to calm her daughter, asking her to check all the posted assignments and reach out to the teacher.

"I'll send her an email and I'll find out what that grade is reflecting," Zumarie tells her, "so don't get upset."

Wiping away tears, Rihanna heads to the dining room table, the original Command Central for the Sepulveda family's five children as they entered remote schooling.

"At the beginning, everything was going smooth," Zumarie said. "The kids were on track."

But two months into remote learning, the family — whose children are in fifth through 12th grade in the Rochester City School District — is struggling to balance school demands with real-world complications.

The one-table remote learning setup? It's been upended as the realities of the daily grind have set in. Some days, the entire family moves to the living room. The last time they did, 16-year-old Reina, the eldest child, retreated to her room.

When Zumarie is out of the house for an internship — she's pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work from the State University College at Brockport — 16-year-old Reina is in charge.

But when Mom is home, Reinaldo grabs a spot on the living room couch or in his mother's room, while the younger children work at the table. Reina, wanting a break, typically works alone in her room.

Encouragingly, Rihanna, 12, and Jeremiah, 13, are all doing well. She was worried the youngest kids would have the most trouble, but so far, that isn't the case. With medication for his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Jeremiah, an eighth-grader at School 33, focuses so intently on his classes that it's difficult to break his attention when he's in the zone.

The youngest family member, Jacob, a fifth-grader at School 33, on the other hand, shares his oldest siblings' frustrations. The long periods of focus that remote learning requires are beginning to wear thin.

And the youngest children have the longest schooldays, too. That doesn't help Jacob's ability to focus: As soon as his older siblings start leaving the table and finishing up for the day, he wants to, too.

Frustration is the order of the day, it seems. Rihanna, still worried about receiving the wrong grade, wipes away tears as she returns to the table where her two younger brothers are still working and tries to settle back into the routine.

Moments later, she's kicked out of class.

The Internet's failed once again.

**Internet woes**

Finding space to learn is just one complication for the Sepulvedas. The family’s internet connection is often unstable, even with the MiFi devices the school district doled out.

One day, all five students were kicked out of their classes because of internet issues. On her mother’s advice, Reina let the teachers know what was happening.

Communication has been vital to getting through this semester, and Zumarie said everyone — from her children’s teachers to her college professors to her internship directors — has been understanding of the difficult situation.

“I am feeling that support from everywhere, of everybody that I’m dealing with, which makes it a lot easier and takes a little bit of the stress,” she said.

In fact, Zumarie believes it’s important for her to share her family’s story, both the highs and lows of what life looks like during the pandemic. COVID-19 has been isolating, and it is easy to feel like every family is an island. By sharing her family’s experience, Zumarie hopes to help others see that they are not alone.

**‘My motor is constantly going’**

That stress manifests itself in different ways. Zumarie learned during parent-teacher conferences that her two oldest kids are failing to turn in all their assignments.

Reinaldo, who’s 14 and a freshman at East High, feels as though he’s being given too much work. Reina, meanwhile, is overwhelmed with juggling her schoolwork and assisting her younger siblings.

Zumarie, though, is firm.

“I don’t believe in the word ‘quit,’ so I’m not trying to teach y’all to be quitters,” she told them.

Zumarie took away Reinaldo’s video games — a tough punishment for a teen, especially during a pandemic.

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**Zumarie Sepulveda checks on her son Jeremiah as he listens to his science class.** PHOTOS BY SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



But his teachers say his intelligence is apparent; he just needs to get those assignments in. And so Zumarie told him: “Until you catch up with your work, you’re not going to see the game.”

The punishment seems to have been effective. That same day, Reinaldo sat at the big table and began catching up on his assignments.

Zumarie shares her children’s feelings of being worn out and feeling listless. Between managing the house and making sure the kids are on top of their work, she still has to complete her internship and her own online classes and assignments.

“It’s like my motor is constantly going and going and going and going and there’s no stopping,” Zumarie said. “It’s between coming here, taking care of the kids, going to the internship, coming back, doing the Zoom class, doing the work — it’s nonstop.”

Even on weekends, Zumarie wakes up early for homework before working around the house. Like her eldest children, she sometimes feels like giving up.

Her children motivate her to push through.

“No matter how hard it’s getting, I’ll be done soon,” Zumarie said.

**Reinaldo Sepulveda, a ninth grader at East High, listens to his geometry class on his laptop Oct. 19. At the start of the school year, all five kids did their remote learning seated around the dining room table, but have since moved around their house to more comfortable or quieter locations.**