

Remote school, teachers unions failed my daughter

Liesl Hickey USA TODAY Columnist

My family is one among the millions trying to figure out how to keep their children's educations on track in the fog of the pandemic.

My third-grade daughter began the 2020-2021 school year at our neighborhood public elementary school where she'd been since kindergarten. She had made it through the previous spring's school-assisted, parent-enforced home schooling in 2020, but after a few months in the fall it became clear that the teaching format was a problem for her. We gave it our best effort. We offered tech support and sporadic help, juggling our own work-from-home situations. It was not nearly enough.

Her first quarter grades were poor and for her, a conscientious student, demoralizing. She now saw herself as a bad student. She joined the millions of American students suffering academically, socially and emotionally because they can't go to school.

How long were we willing to wait to see if the public schools might reopen? How far down would we follow her negative trajectory?

Right after the district's November 2020 announcement that there was no plan for kids to return to school until February we withdrew her from her public school. My daughter loved our public school, the community, her friends and teachers. Pre-COVID, we had no intention to leave it. But when we miraculously found her a spot in a great parochial school that held in-person instruction four days a week (Wednesdays are virtual from home), we took it.

Almost immediately I saw an improvement in her mental health and educational attainment. She wears a mask during the school day and is flourishing. It turns out I wasn't the only parent fed up: As the opening bell of the 2020-2021 school year rang, D.C. Public Schools and D.C. public charter schools had about 20,000 fewer students enrolled than the year before.

On Feb. 2, Washington, D.C., public schools finally made their first attempt at reopening, but available slots are limited and returning to in-person instruction is optional. Even as the district makes these stutter steps, the Washington Teachers' Union is threatening to strike.

Most parents, students, and educators acknowledge that the quality of in-person instruction can't be equaled with online learning. So then, there are only two meaningful questions: Can schools open? If so, why aren't they? Last month, a study authored by three scientists with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said yes, they can, with precautions. 'The type of rapid spread that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites,' the study said, 'has not been reported in education settings in schools.'

The unions, school boards and some politicians need to be honest. In fact, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, co-authored a column warning 'data alone is not enough to convince parents, educators or students that they'll be safe in schools.' But, they are not the impediment to opening our schools. Weingarten is distracting from the key point: Unions are the primary reason schools remain closed. In the nation's 10th largest school district, Fairfax County leaders are moving in the direction opposite of where the science is pointing. 'Opening,' as they define it, would mean two days a week. And the union wants planning to slow down until after vaccination. County leaders won't even consider five days a week in a classroom and last week Virginia's Governor Ralph Northam merely requested, rather than ordered, all schools in the state to offer some form of in-person learning by March 15.

In addition to the governor's request, we're starting to see how this impasse gets resolved. My organization, N2 America, a center-right policy non-profit doing research on this issue, conducted a focus group with 19 public school parents from across suburban Virginia. Not surprisingly, we found parents are frustrated with the chaos and see unions as the central obstacle to school re-openings.

Even the unions have noticed that they are losing the goodwill of parents. Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, told Politico last year: 'Teachers went from heroes in March (2020) when parents saw what we do everyday, and now we've become, in some people's eyes, the villains because we are speaking up about the safety concerns we see.'

But the fact is, despite unions' objections, schools can be opened safely. If schools remain closed and unions continue to ignore science, I'd expect politicians that do their bidding to pay the price.

Liesl Hickey lives in Washington, D.C., and is the co-founder of N2 America, a non-profit focused on policies and ideas that better the lives of American families.



[\(c\) KitSap Sun](#)

[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)

Friday, 02/12/2021 Page .A06

(c) KitSap Sun