

To: Governor Kate Brown, Members of the Oregon State Legislature Senate and House Education Committees, Covid-19 Reopening Council, top administrators at the Oregon Department of Education and Oregon Health Authority, Oregon School Board Association, Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, Oregon Superintendents, and media.

From: Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., Director of Embrace Civility. <http://embracecivility.org> and <http://bepositivelypowerful.com>.

Re: The Emotional Well-being of School Staff in Oregon

Date: January 6, 2021

The Governor's Lump of Coal given to Oregon school staff the day before Christmas was exceptionally discouraging. The infection rate of the Covid virus is exploding in Oregon. There is a new variant of the virus that is far more likely to impact children. In fact, given the behavior of viruses, it is highly likely that this opportunistic virus mutated to this more virulent form among children who were brought together for schooling.

The Governor indicated that it was safe to return students to school because of the history of infections in Oregon. It should be clearly noted that until very recently pediatricians in Oregon have not had ready access to numerous tests for Covid-19. Therefore, their practice has been to only give tests to children if there was a documented exposure. Therefore, the numbers on the Oregon Weekly Reports cannot be considered to be an accurate statement of the infection rate. Approximately one-third of children (likely higher because we are not testing them effectively) have no symptoms. They can transmit the virus to other children, to school staff, and to their family members.

Of great concern is the attitude of school leaders, both administrators and board members, in the more rural parts of this state. In these communities there is a well-recognized disregard for the seriousness of the concern associated with the virus and the lack of support for abiding by essential safety precautions. Many of these districts rapidly announced plans to stay open or reopen in person — clearly without any substantive engagement with their staff — in regions where the infection rates are soaring and can be expected to go even higher as the impact of the holiday travels is experienced.

### **School Staff is Scared**

I set up a survey and made a post in the Oregon Safe Return to School group on January 2, I asked both certified and classified school staff to respond to this one question: "Please provide three words (single words) that apply to how you are feeling after Governor Brown's announcement on December 24 about schools reopening. Within several days, there were over 1,200 responses.

By count these were the most frequent words:

<b>weight</b>	<b>word</b>
<b>250</b>	scared
<b>162</b>	anxious
<b>137</b>	betrayed
<b>130</b>	angry
<b>117</b>	disappointed
<b>108</b>	frustrated
<b>108</b>	worried
<b>93</b>	confused
<b>76</b>	disrespected
<b>64</b>	terrified

This word cloud displays the top words listed. Anyone who does not think this is a concern, please think again.



On January 5, the American Academy of Pediatrics updated their guidance on Covid-19. <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/> This guidance contained the following statement about staff mental health.

### **Mental Health of Staff**

The personal impact on educators and other school staff should be recognized. In the same way that students need ongoing support to process the information they are being taught; teachers cannot be expected to be successful at teaching children without having their mental health needs supported. The strain on teachers this year as they have been asked to teach differently while they support their own needs and those of their families has been significant. Additional challenges with staff shortages, changing learning modalities, and prolonged duration of the crisis are continuing to present additional challenges and further impact teachers and school staff. Resources such as Employee Assistance Programs and other means to provide support and mental health services should be prioritized. The individual needs and concerns of school professionals should be addressed with accommodations made as needed (eg, for a classroom educator who is pregnant, has a medical condition that confers a higher risk of serious illness with COVID-19, resides with a family member who is at higher risk, or has a mental health condition that compromises the ability to cope with the additional stress).

Although schools should be prepared to be agile to meet evolving needs and respond to increasing knowledge related to the pandemic and may need to institute partial or complete closures when the public health need requires, school leaders should recognize that staff, students, and families will benefit from sufficient time to understand and adjust to changes in routine and practices. During a crisis, people benefit from clear and regular communication from a trusted source of information and the opportunity to dialogue about concerns and needs and feel they are able to contribute in some way to the decision-making process. Change is more difficult in the context of crisis and when predictability is already severely compromised.

The damage inflicted upon Oregon school staff by both state and some district leaders is profound. This damage will have a long lasting, exceptionally harmful impact on school climate well into the future.

This post was made in the Oregon Safe Return group around the same time. I asked the poster and she connected with the person who wrote this and provided permission for me to reprint this.

This was a post by another teacher. I am afraid more post like this are in our future.

Today I said no more and closed the chapter to my 15-year career as an educator. This decision did not come easy, and for those of you not in education, I hope this posting shines a light on the literal hell educators (or maybe it is just me) have been enduring since March:

March and April started off shouting how teachers were superheroes. We took an environment that was 100% face to face and moved it virtual in a matter of a week.

May wrapped up calmly as everyone was still in the, "We are all in this together" phase. However, what was unseen was the extreme hours teachers were putting in. The nightmare had begun.

Fast forward to August when all hell began. Teachers in a matter of 2 months went from superheroes to arch enemy #1. The attacks came from every angle. For me, I was accessible 24 hours a day. I would hear about it at the grocery store, in my neighborhood, from friends and let's not even discuss the vile things said in email, board meetings and social media about teachers.

August continued with the level of respect for educators down to nothing. In what other field are you asked to go on a Google Doc daily to sign in and sign out? And if that were not enough, let's not forget the paper document where we had to account for every minute of every day. Heaven forbid you are 30 minutes short in your calculation, who cares that you didn't have a planning period, and worked at night and on weekends, your pay got docked for those 30 minutes. It was getting bad, really bad...I didn't sign up to be an essential worker, nor did I sign up to take the outright harassment and abuse I did daily. This was not why I went to school.

September entered, and although we as educators had been given a choice to work from home, it did not come without a cost to our health, families, and life. The harassing emails continued, as many as 200 a week, the "Teachers do nothing at home, but go to Orange Fitness" attack began. Parents started petitions and said hateful things every opportunity they got. They said things that were so far from the truth, but we, as educators could not speak up and defend ourselves. What they didn't realize was it wasn't the teachers fault. Imagine being in the biggest airplane in the world as a flight attendant and realizing there was no pilot or captain navigating. No one in the trenches had a voice at all. Our opinions never asked, and if they were, they weren't listened to. Our building administrators were doing all they could, but their hands were tied too. I am lucky, I had 2 amazing building administrators who fought and fought hard at that.

SIDEBAR: Can we talk about the money teachers spent out of their own pockets to try to implement virtual education? My internet bill increased over \$100+ monthly just to have the internet to do my job.

October....many of us don't like talking about October, at least I don't. This was the breaking point for many, especially me. October came and the attacks started becoming more intense, teachers (again maybe just me) had become the human punching bag - on one side was the district and on the other side were parents. Both barreled through teachers to get their point across. Students radio silent, Parents and Community members attacking, but yet never walked one day in my shoes or any shoes of my colleagues. Board meetings and conversations continually focused on what was best for students.

Then November came, and as bad as I thought October was it could have never prepared me for November. At the November board of education meeting, a board member said, "Wouldn't it be nice to not work Wednesdays." She was alleging that teachers didn't work. Wednesdays like many days didn't even provide me the time to get up to go to the restroom in my own home! I remember one Wednesday, I walked into my kitchen to grab coffee, returned to my computer 3 minutes later to 17 emails. See what board members didn't realize, or maybe they did, anytime anything was said against teachers, about our workload, etc. the hatred and anger came back on teachers ten times worse from parents and community members. It was at this meeting they decided despite science and data, but due to what the constituents

wanted to force all staff back in the building. They stated that if 3 areas turned red (transmission rate, # of positive cases, and percentage of positive cases) that students would go back virtual; however, teachers would still be required to be in the building. It was at that point I realized no more, and submitted my formal resignation on 11/18/2020, but made the commitment to finish the semester.

SIDEBAR: These 3 areas to go all virtual have gone red twice in December, but the district never went to all virtual learning.

So here we are in December, and today was my last day. I have such peace, and each day and am reminded that my decision to leave was the right one. I am so grateful for the people I have worked with over the past 15 years! You have taught me so much about who I am as a person and an educator! The thousands of students I have taught have changed me and taught me as much as I taught them.

SIDEBAR: It was interesting to me that at this specific board meeting, accolades were given to bus drivers and cafeteria workers who have done an amazing job, but again the encouragement for teachers was not there. It was as though we didn't exist and had worked hard, harder than I had in 15 years.

SO WHY WRITE THIS NOW? Teachers have had no voice this year, we couldn't speak up, we couldn't say what has been going on, but were expected to sit quietly while the attacks continued. While, I do realize some teachers have not encountered some of the things above, or have had an easy semester, please know not everyone has.

I know I am leaving having done everything I physically could to be the best educator I could, and to serve students to the best of my ability, and many times sacrificing my own family to do so.

ANOTHER SIDEBAR: I have been recently reminded how teachers are the pawn in all of this. They are taking \$1,000 out of my reserve because I am leaving. For non-teachers, this is the money that take from each check to pay us over Summer break. I have contacted the district twice to see what was in my reserve but could not get an answer. Interesting enough this is a \$250 increase from the previous year. This is a stab in the back as an educator. When I think of the tears and stress not mention the countless hours of overtime, and thousands of dollars spent to make a classroom ready for students, I and so many others have put in this year, was it all worth it?

No, I am not sure what I am doing in January but feel confident that leaving education is the right choice. I would love to become an advocate for educators, a voice for the reality of being a teacher.

But I do know one thing, my daughter who sacrificed a lot with me being an educator especially the last 9 months deserves this new journey, my mental health deserves this new journey, my physical health deserves this new journey, and my spiritual health deserves this new journey.

So today, I said no more.