

The New York Times

I Won't Return to the Classroom, and You Shouldn't Ask Me To

Please don't make me risk getting Covid-19 to teach your child.

By Rebecca Martinson (Ms. Martinson is a public-school teacher).

July 18, 2020



A teacher entering a classroom on June 29 to collect her belongings left behind before schools in New York were shut down in March.

Credit...

Michael Loccisano/Getty Images

SEDRO-WOOLLEY, Wash. — Every day when I walk into work as a public-school teacher, I am prepared to take a bullet to save a child. In the age of school shootings, that's what the job requires. But asking me to return to the classroom amid a pandemic and expose myself and

my family to Covid-19 is like asking me to take that bullet home to my own family.

I won't do it, and you shouldn't want me to.

I became an educator after a career as a nurse. I teach medical science and introduction to nursing to 11th and 12th graders at [a regional skills center](#) that serves students from 22 different high schools in 13 different school districts.

My school district and school haven't ruled out asking us return to in-person teaching in the fall. As careful and proactive as the administration has been when it comes to exploring plans to return to the classroom, nothing I have heard reassures me that I can safely teach in person.

[More than 75](#) New York Department of Education employees have died of Covid-19. [CDC guidelines](#) say a return to traditional schooling with in-person classes would involve the "highest risk" for Covid-19 spread. But even in-person classes with students spaced apart and prevented from sharing materials are categorized as leading to "more risk." The "lowest risk" for spread, according to the CDC, is virtual learning. I can't understand why we would choose more risk than is necessary.

It's impossible to hear about the way parties, [day camps](#) and [church services](#) have led to outbreaks this summer without worrying about what will happen if kids and adults gather in the fall. It scares me to think of how many more lives will be lost. It terrifies me that I could be among those who lose their lives.

I completely understand why parents and administrators want kids to return to school. When we first started online learning in March, it was miserable — pointless, even. Eventually, we established parameters, and I figured out how to teach kids across the northwest corner of Washington State virtually. During summer school, I've live-streamed my lectures into campgrounds, living rooms and bedrooms decorated with twinkly lights or festooned with posters. My virtual classroom includes pets and younger siblings.

Yes, it has been hard. Yesterday, as several really adorable teenage faces laughed through the computer screen at my use of a Tyrannosaurus Rex to explain the sympathetic nervous system and the feeling of impending doom it can cause, I thought, "I miss them." I wished I was standing in my favorite place in the world, my classroom

— because, frankly, that T-Rex analogy is much better when accompanied by my dino walk.

But it amazes me how fast students adapted to remote learning. I teach a particularly hands-on class. This summer, I've managed to teach them to type blood, to suture wounds and how the sensory system works. I've taught them all about infection control and epidemiology — they can not only tell you that you should wear a mask, but they can show you how to do it correctly. I used to put my hand over students' hands to guide them through certain lessons. Now I use a GoPro camera. It's hard, but they are learning.

Most important, we — students and teacher — are safe.

If I'm asked to return to the classroom as the pandemic rages, I will have to walk away. As deeply as I love teaching, I will not risk spreading this virus in a way that could hurt a child or a family member of a child. While children make up a small proportion of U.S. coronavirus cases and they are less likely to become seriously ill than adults, the virus might be linked to "[multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children](#)." Plus, many of my students struggle with poverty or are from multigenerational households. I will not risk passing a virus to them that they might pass to their vulnerable loved ones. I won't do it.

It isn't fair to ask teachers to buy school supplies; we aren't the government. But we do it anyway. It isn't fair to ask us to stop a bullet; we aren't soldiers. But we go to work every day knowing that if there's a school shooting, we'll die protecting our students.

But this is where I draw the line: It isn't fair to ask me to be part of a massive, unnecessary science experiment. I am not a human research subject. I will not do it.

Rebecca Martinson is a teacher at Northwest Career & Technical Academy in Mount Vernon, Wash.

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).