

“Defeated and hopeless”: The past year’s brutal impact on teachers

By Alyce Brown

While we do not make a habit of publishing anonymous interviews, the Spartan Shield editorial staff allowed two interviews below to remain anonymous at teachers’ requests, enabling them to speak freely and without fear of repercussions.

There truly is no rest for the weary. Teachers across Iowa and the nation have been left feeling frustrated and defeated by this school year that has increased both their workloads and their risks of infection.

Educators who wanted to keep their jobs were left with no choice but to return to school in the midst of the pandemic’s fall grip, disregarding any personal health problems. “Exposure to contagious disease is an accepted risk for those who choose the healthcare field. However, when people entered the teaching profession, this was never an anticipated hurdle,” said an anonymous Pleasant Valley high school teacher.

Returning to school during a pandemic has uprooted every educational norm, and teachers have shouldered the brunt of it. Teaching the in-person students while also adapting classes to an online format for virtual students has proved to be an extra-neous amount of work, one that English teacher Lynne Lundberg said has cost her a minimum of 20 extra hours per week. “I think we teachers are being asked to do more than is humanly possible,” she said.

“Staff morale is at an all time low,” a second anonymous PVHS teacher added. “I know the students are under a lot of stress, but sometimes it feels like no one has considered how much stress has been put on teachers to stay committed to excellence.”

And teachers can never see where, exactly, their hard work is going. With first semester’s hybrid schedule, the connection between teachers and students that often keeps them going has been blurred and somewhat disconnected. “One of the worst things you can feel as a teacher is that you are letting

your kids down, and when they are outside of the classroom half the time you just never know what’s going on,” said government and sociology teacher Trever Zahn.

There is a noticeable difference when walking the halls of Pleasant Valley as of late. The teachers described the general mood among staff as one of frustration,

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hopelessness and defeat, and recounted feelings of being kicked while down. Multiple times they referenced predictions or plans of an en masse exit from the profession after this difficult year.

Looking at their support (or lack thereof) during this year, the frustration in the profession comes as absolutely no surprise. It was recommended to me that I look into the “toxic positivity” that has permeated the educational sector in this difficult year, and it paints a picture of the positive layer that teachers have had to hide under. Repeated pushes of “we can get through this!” and “do it for the kids!” have been shoved down teachers’ throats in

an attempt to put a bandaid on their problems, but have likely been adding to them.

“When positivity is used to cover up or silence the human experience, it becomes toxic,” said Jamie Long, a clinical psychologist, on the subject of COVID-era toxic positivity in schools.

For many teachers, the final straw has been governor Kim Reynolds’ recent requirement of a 100% in-person option, which overrode and disregarded the plans already put in place by school districts after countless hours of planning. Following a year of struggles and sacrifices, the decision being made without consideration for the well-being of the teachers is seen by many educators as disrespectful.

Lawmakers rejected an amendment that would have allowed the 100% in-person model to hold off until teachers had received both the first and second dose of the vaccine, a rejection that many teachers found frustrating and even insulting.

Looking to the future, it doesn’t seem like it will be getting any easier for teachers. When the new learning model begins, teachers will have to juggle their online and in-person students with a much larger fear of becoming infected. “I fear we are tempting science,” the first anonymous teacher said.

Educators have no choice but to push through to the end of the year, facing an uncertain future and a relentless amount of stress and pressure. Students: Thank a teacher. And Teachers: We appreciate you, and your resilient dedication does not go unnoticed by the students you have touched.