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3 New York teachers on the endless heartbreak and stress of COVID-19: 'There are days when I just go home and cry'

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- Burnout has become a growing problem among teachers during the pandemic.
- Insider spoke with three New York-based teachers about what it's been like.
- They said it's emotionally draining work and they struggle to get help from administrators.

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Teachers have had to adapt to ever-changing work conditions throughout the pandemic. Jon Cherry/Stringer/Getty Images

This as-told-to article is based on transcribed conversations with three workers whose words have been edited for length and clarity.

It's no secret that teachers are overworked and exhausted two years into teaching during the pandemic. One recent survey showed that 50% of teachers are [considering leaving education](#) sooner because of COVID-19.

With the spring semester underway, three veteran teachers spoke to Insider about the burnout they're dealing with and how the pandemic has changed teaching.

'Forget academics — we're still just teaching the basics: how to sit, listen, and ask questions'

Jennifer Heaphy. Courtesy photo At the start of the 2021 school year, the behavior I saw from students was shocking.

Jennifer Heaphy, 50, is a second-grade teacher in Webster, New York, and has been teaching for 30 years.

On the playground, the children would howl at each other like wolves. They were feral. They'd lost the ability to interact with other children, they couldn't wait their turn, and they couldn't focus. They were rolling around on the ground, which is very atypical for seven- to eight-year-olds.

Picture a lot of crying and a lot of injuries. Kids biting and punching each other. Halfway through the school year, we've progressed, but it's almost like we're resocializing these children. Forget academics — we're still just teaching them the basics: how to sit, listen, and ask questions.

We're dealing with all of this on top of a lot of negativity from parents and community members. Some attack us for enforcing state mask mandates, and others are angry and afraid we'll loosen up on protocols.

There are days when I just go home and cry. I cry for these kids, and I cry for the way the job has changed.

I feel like people think teachers are whining, but working with children — it's not like being in a cubicle. The job has always required a lot of energy, but the stress of the COVID-19 situation layered on top of these kids' growing needs is exhausting. I sympathize with young teachers who say, "I don't know if I can keep doing this."

'I leave work every day both physically and emotionally exhausted'

Bob Hechler. Courtesy photo

Bob Hechler, 56, is a high-school visual-arts teacher in the Bronx, New York, and has been teaching for 22 years.

The administration wants to pretend we're 100% back to normal and everything's fine. They want teachers and kids to act as if there was no pandemic. It's incredibly stressful.

I'm working in the classroom, after class, and late into the night to try to help my students make up for the work they missed the year before as well as provide them emotional support as a caretaker. I'm carrying the weight of it all on my shoulders.

Yes, students are academically behind, but a lot of them are emotionally broken, too, and that's what we ought to be focused on fixing.

The kids are the only thing that make me get up and come into work every day. I have five or six years until retirement. If I were in a less stressful environment, I'd go another 15 years because I truly love teaching.

As it is, I leave work every day both physically and emotionally exhausted. How long can anyone do that?

'This pandemic has taken away something I was good at'

Laura C. Courtesy photo

Laura C. (who asked to keep her last name anonymous for privacy reasons), 47, is a high-school teacher in West Babylon, New York, and has been teaching for 21 years.

Teaching has always been a lot of work, but it was work you felt good about doing because you were appreciated. In recent years, and especially since the start of the pandemic, our society has lost respect for the profession. There's no empathy or consideration for teachers as professionals, let alone human beings.

The workload is enormous. Nothing's been taken off our plates and new things are constantly being added.

Last year, we all had to learn how to teach virtually overnight. Our curriculum needed to be revised and reinvented.

This year, we're livestreaming, so materials need to be loaded to Google Classroom for kids in quarantine. Mind you, I'm not a technologically savvy person. It's time consuming, all that scanning and inputting. Figuring out how to present materials differently takes a lot of thought — all of this on top of meeting our student's emotional needs.

I'm tired in a way I've never been tired before. I dread going to school. I feel anxious a lot. I could cry at the drop of a hat. Last year, at Christmas break, I walked out sobbing because I was just so happy we'd made it that far.

I'm amazed we're surviving. I shouldn't feel that way. I've been in this profession for a very long time. Not that it should ever be easy, but I'd become good at my job. This pandemic has taken away something I was good at.

If you try to talk to the school administration about burnout, they'll turn to your contract and describe what you're contractually obligated to do.

Absenteeism is so high because yes, people are sick, but it's also just easier to stay home. Even our union reps are discouraging us from talking about it.

There's no compassion. If you try to vocalize what's happening, they think you're complaining. We're not complaining. We're asking for help.

Are you a teacher dealing with burnout due to the pandemic? Contact Laura Casado at lcasado@insider.com.