

## Over 1,000 Educators Died From COVID. Here's the Story of One

By [Lesli A. Maxwell](#) — December 19, 2022



Reports of school staff dying from COVID are now scarce—a tremendous relief. But a bittersweet relief, as people still die and the pandemic persists.

Since the spring of 2020, Education Week documented 1,308 active and retired educators who succumbed to the virus. Among the total, 451 were active teachers. School staff members, including secretaries, food service workers, bus drivers, and others comprised the second biggest group of deaths at 332.

Today—Dec. 19, 2022—will be the final update to [our memorial gallery](#).

It will stand as an imperfect historical record—our collection is not comprehensive. And it will stand as an imperfect measure of the enormity of loss.

The loss of dedicated educators like **Sandra Santos-Vizcaíno**.



Sandra Santos-Vizcaíno

The 3rd grade dual-language teacher at P.S. 9 in the Brooklyn borough of New York City was among the earliest wave of educators to die in the pandemic, on March 31, 2020. A street in the Sunset Park neighborhood in Brooklyn now bears her name. Student artwork adorns P.S. 9’s playground benches in her honor.

But those visible markers of her life fall short of what she actually gave—and what she still means to her school community.

“She was such a nurturer. She built relationships with her students and her families that was inspiring to all of us,” said Selisa Peña, a P.S. 9 teacher.

“Once you were a student in her class, you were her student forever,” said Jocelyn Burgos, another P.S. 9 teacher who considered Vizcaíno a mentor and her “work mom.”

“I used to drive home with her after school, and she had all these families’ numbers in her phone,” Burgos said. “These were family members of her former students. And she would make regular calls to those parents to ask about their kids.”

When Burgos first joined the P.S. 9 faculty to teach 5th grade, Vizcaíno sought her out straightaway. She wanted to see which of her former students was on the roster. She wanted Burgos to know something about each of them.

“This one has a strong sense of justice,” Burgos said Vizcaíno told her about one student. “This one thinks they aren’t good at math, but they are,” she told Burgos of another as she moved down the list to share an insight about each child.

That depth of caregiving extended to her fellow teachers, Marlene Henríquez, another teacher at P.S. 9, said. Regularly, Vizcaíno would summon Henríquez to her classroom to eat empanadas she made in an air fryer. She insisted, every year, that Henríquez take part in Día de la Madre—Mother’s Day in the Dominican Republic—even though Henríquez had no children of her own.

“She told me, ‘You’re a mother to all these children who are your students,’” Henriuez said.

Vizcano’s presence is still strong at P.S. 9.

When teachers and students returned to the school building after a long stretch of virtual learning, Burgos moved into her classroom.

“It felt like I inherited something so special,” she said. “I would find her notes, her resources. It was amazing to be in her space.”

This year, Pea is teaching in that classroom.

## **Commemorating lives cut short**

Collecting the names, ages, titles, schools/districts, and dates of death for [this memorial gallery](#) has been a labor of honor and respect. I read each person’s obituary or news article about their deaths. They were educators and school personnel of all ages, races, genders. They were from all regions of the United States.

My partner in this endeavor, Visuals Editor Jaclyn Borowski, would search for photos for each person. She found one for most of them.

Many were so young, something Jackie especially noticed. Official obituary photos showed them in graduation caps and gowns, with visibly pregnant bellies, and on their wedding days.

“The other thing that struck me were how many of their photos were selfies,” she said. “It made me wonder about the moment they took that photo, the moment they were in in their lives, how quickly and unexpectedly their lives changed.”

I’d like to express my deep gratitude to the sources I relied heavily on to capture the names of those who died: my EdWeek librarian colleagues Holly Peele and Maya Riser-Kositsky, the obituary writers at local news outlets across the United States, and [@Losttocolid](#), a Twitter account relentlessly dedicated to paying tribute to America’s K-12 personnel who died in the pandemic.