

Good afternoon, thank you for allowing me here today to tell you about my story. My name is Angela Skillings. I received a Bachelor's of Science in Elementary Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership from Northern Arizona University. I am also a Reading Specialist with the State of Arizona. I have been teaching for 17 years and will be starting my 14th year at my district. I am the 2nd grade teacher at Leonor Hambly K-8 school, one of two schools in the Hayden-Winkelman Unified School District, located in the tiny Eastern town of Winkelman, Arizona. Last year, we had approximately 300 Kindergarten through 12th grade students with 90% Hispanic and 84% free and reduced lunch. This is the statistical data one reports, but I feel I need to add that in our district most students go to our schools Pre-K year thru Senior year. They attend school with my own children, with the same classmates for 14 years! Our schools are more than a community, we're a family. This is important for you to understand our struggles.

This summer our district held virtual summer school. Teachers worked together in grade level bands (K-2, 3-5, 6-8) and provided enrichment activities to students who wanted to continue their learning. Our district administration believed that we could work together in the same classroom as long as we followed CDC and district protocols, especially since that our state had reopened many businesses and our COVID 19 numbers were not what they are currently. Each grade level band had staggered start times, we had to do temperature checks, wear masks, social distance, and maintain proper hygiene. On June 8th, Kimberely Byrd, Jena Martinez-Inzunza, and I started our adventure in the classroom. We taught together from 8:00 am-9:30 am, then planned for the following day and the next week from 9:30 am-11:00 am. We practiced distancing, working on our own devices and not sharing even a pencil. Our first week of summer school came to an end on June 11th. On the morning of June 14th, I was notified that Kim was taken into the hospital and put on a ventilator. The family was waiting for COVID test results. Jena and I went into contact quarantine immediately. Later that evening, we got the news that she had tested positive. Our county health department was already scheduled for the following day at our school to administer testing to the employees who wanted to be tested. Jena and I made sure to get there early so that we would not be around others, possibly spreading the virus if we tested positive. On Tuesday June 16th, I started showing symptoms of COVID-19, Jena the next day. I got a positive test result on Thursday June 18th, Jena got her positive result the following Tuesday June 23rd. During this time, 12 other members of Kim's family tested positive. Sadly, we lost Kim on Friday June 26th and her brother Roy, who was a full-time substitute teacher in a neighboring district, lost his life to COVID-19 3 weeks later. I was on quarantine for 6 weeks, some days feeling like I was getting better, other days feeling like I got hit by a bus and couldn't see an end in sight. I would like to interject here that a few of our colleagues, who fortunately tested negative waited over 16 days to receive their results. Some were so stressed out not knowing if they were putting their loved ones in danger, they opted to go out on their own for a second test. This added the stress of waiting on yet more test results that took over yet another week.

Now our district has hit another wall. Four of our support staff have contracted the virus, two food service workers and two maintenance workers that also serve as bus drivers. Our school is on shut down as the others are on quarantine awaiting test results. Who is going to disinfect their work areas while they are in quarantine? This is our entire maintenance staff who were preparing our school for Arizona's August 17th in person start date. 7 staff members have contracted COVID-19..that is 11% of our DISTRICT staff. We also have 8 sets of faculty who are family in the same house (spouses, siblings,

parent/child) and if one of them contract COVID-19, then we face the possibility of the other person also being exposed, putting more of our staff in quarantine and out of the school setting.

I think about the emotional impact of losing Kim on our students, both past and present. About an hour after I got the news of Kim's passing, I had a parent call me. Kim was her daughter's teacher for two years, the following year this child became my 2nd Grader. The little girl kept crying, "I don't want you to die Ms. Skillings, please, fight through this. Mrs. Byrd left us. You can't die too. Please tell me you are okay." This went on for about 20 minutes. I had to push through my grief and put on the teacher hat. I had to calm this child down and make her understand that I was doing well, even though at the time I was very sick and not sure how much more I could take.

A few days after I tested negative (6 weeks of being on quarantine), I ran into a former student who had just graduated from high school. This student ran up to me and pulled me into his arms. He cried on my shoulder for 15 minutes, continually saying, "Thank God you are okay. I was so scared you would die. I prayed so hard for you to recover. I never want to go through that again." This broke me. To know that my illness, my fight, made students worry about me and my possible death.

We have been continually told that children do not contract or transmit the virus like adults. We have sheltered our youth since March, when America's schools shut down. The message is loud and clear: educators know that our classrooms are a petri dish. By forcing our schools to open, I cannot help but believe that we are using our students as guinea pigs! Are their lives worth gaining more data on the younger group? For statistics? Now let me ask you a question: Can you honestly tell me that children do not get infected? That they do not transmit the virus as previously stated? And if you do believe this, then why haven't you been able to stop the exponential rise of infection? Why is there NO control over the spread of the virus?

I can tell you, after teaching for 7 years in 2nd grade, students pass around everything. They share, they talk and hug. They are kids, kids who haven't seen each other in over 5 months. Kids who have been sheltered and with siblings and parents. Once we open the classrooms, they are going to be all over one another, hugging and sharing stories. Social distancing will be out the door, even with teachers trying their best to keep them separated. Spotting a person who is ill is easy when they show symptoms, but the dangerous person, at any age, is the asymptomatic person. We do not know they are infected until someone they have been in contact with has started exhibiting symptoms. By the time this discovery has been made, how many days have passed and how many people have they been in contact with? Here is an example: "Johnny contracted the virus from another asymptomatic student. Johnny goes to his grandparents' house every day after school. A week later, both grandparents are ill with the virus, as well as Johnny's parents. After testing, Johnny was found to be asymptomatic POSITIVE. Through contact tracing, it was found that Johnny brought the virus home from school and spread it amongst his family members." Now let's trace everywhere Johnny's family has been in the last week. How many more people have been exposed to the virus in that short amount of time?

I have been asked many times, "When do you think it will be safe to open schools?" My response to that is, schools will be safe to open when our number of positive cases have declined drastically. We need to see the bottom of the bell curve, not the top. We need to see that America has control of the spread of COVID-19 before we open our schools. If it is not safe for adults to go back to work, to hold political conventions, to meet in the same room, is it safe to open schools? President Trump canceled the Republican National Convention. Reported by BBC the President said, "It's a different world, and it

will be for a little while." He added that he "just felt it was wrong" to put potentially tens of thousands of attendees at risk. "We didn't want to take any chances," he told reporters. "We have to be careful and we have to set an example." The Washington Post reported Trump as saying "I looked at my team, and I said the timing for this event is not right, just not right with what's happened recently. The flare-up in Florida is not the right time. It is really something that for me, I have to protect the American people. That's what I've always done, that's what I always do, that's what I'm about." If it is not safe for the Republican National Convention and the attendees, then why is it safe for children, America's future leaders, to be forced back into the classroom? Why are the lives of those attending the Republican National Convention more important than our children?

Another question I have been asked is, "What do schools need from the government?" Well, attitude reflects leadership, so many people are pushing for the opening of schools. When the Novel Coronavirus disrupted everyday life, school closures had schools scrambling to provide students with education in a manner we were not prepared for. Since then, schools have been preparing to start virtually because of the spread of the virus. Now that we have been preparing to teach virtually, we recognize that school will look different. Teachers will be teaching face to face, offering whole group and small group instruction on a virtual platform. Schools are making adjustment to address student needs, per their district. Our district is putting an emphasis on social and emotional learning.

Yes, teachers want to be in their classrooms, but teachers also need to think of themselves and their families. Our job is not to only think about our students. My classroom is not my life. I have my family at home, and I have my own health and wellbeing to think about. Have our leaders thought about that? Have they thought about the fact that our country has a teacher shortage? We need the support of our leaders. We need them to understand that while they are working from home or at a limited capacity, we are scared to enter a classroom with 20+ students because we do not want to get sick and take the virus home to our own families. Have any members of government spent an entire day at school with educators to really see for themselves what the job entails and the smallest details it takes to get through a day? Then after having done this try to explain the logistics of keeping everyone safe. Guidelines help in theory but carry no weight with the multiple what ifs of a kindergarten classroom.

Schools also need more funding. We are underfunded already. I do thank our government for what you have sent to our state already. The amount of money our district received was used to purchase supplies to make our classrooms safer, such as plexiglass and disinfectant. However, funding for extended transportation is still lacking. Students have to social distance on busses. The bus that used to transport 70 students, can now only transport 25. That means that the bus will have to make 3 to 4 trips on the same route to pick up all the students. Our small district has 5 different bus routes. Instead of 10 trips a day, we are now looking at 30-40 trips a day (to and from school). We also service students who live 24+ miles out of town. One of those buses brings in well over 40 students. We will need more money for fuel, to pay bus drivers, and to maintain the buses.

I have said this quote many times: "We can recover a child's lost education, but we cannot recover a life lost." Thank you again for taking the time to hear my story.