

# Nine teachers reflect on a school year like no other

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Justin Lopez-Cardoze, a seventh-grade science teacher at Capital City Public Charter School in D.C., spent the entire year teaching virtually, which he said allowed students to become engaged in different ways. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

There hasn't been much time this school year for teachers to reflect. They've been busy. Busy making sure the kids in their classrooms kept their masks on. And making sure the kids at home kept their cameras on. They had to keep their students physically safe and distant. But also mentally safe and connected.

They've been busy teaching, too. Teaching under conditions and in ways

they had never imagined before the [coronavirus](#) made Zoom, quarantining and temperature checks as much a part of the school day as reading, writing and recess.

Now, as the first full school year of the pandemic has ended in many states and winds to a close everywhere else, many of the nation's 3.2 million public school teachers and 500,000 private schoolteachers are taking stock.

How did it go? How did I do? What worked? What failed miserably? How can we make sure we never have to do this again? Please tell me we won't have to do this again.

At the beginning of the school year, The Washington Post [interviewed nine teachers](#) across the country about their expectations and asked them to write about how they were approaching the year to come. Their [essays](#) reflected confidence and concern, hope beyond hope and, in some cases, despair.

[\*Dispatches from education's front lines: Teachers share their experiences as school returns during the pandemic\*](#)

Some feared the year could be a lost cause. Others wondered if it could be an opportunity for new thinking about education and a chance to experiment. All worried about the health of their students — and their own.

In interviews with those same teachers over the past month, they talked about how the year forced them to adapt and even rethink their approach to teaching. It unearthed resilience they didn't know they had. But it's also clear the school year took its toll.

**'It was like teaching under a tornado warning all day, every day.'**

"It was a beating. An absolute beating," said Khalil Abouhamad, a special-education teacher at East Union High School in Manteca, Calif., with 11 years of experience.

"The year was rough. There's no other way to put it," said Laura Estes-Swilley, a veteran English teacher at Durant High School in Hillsborough County, Fla.

"I know I've survived this, but yeah, I'm pretty much exhausted, to be completely honest," said Jessyca Mathews, an English teacher at Carman-Ainsworth High School in Flint Township, Mich.

"How did I feel? Is crying an appropriate response?" said Amanda Lhéritier, who this year taught 5- and 6-year-olds at the private Tuckahoe Montessori School in Richmond. "It made me want to have a vacation more than I have ever wanted a vacation in my life."

Against the backdrop of the pandemic that took the lives of more than [600,000 Americans](#), teachers also navigated their students through an intense and ongoing period of racial reckoning, the most divisive presidential race in modern history and a mob-led insurrection that threatened to overturn the election of the freest country on Earth. There wasn't a day, it seemed, that was stress-free.

Much of the first half of the school year, particularly for teachers with students in physical classrooms, was consumed by safety protocols, coronavirus testing, constant cleaning and a fear of getting sick.

"It was like teaching under a tornado warning all day, every day," Ben White, a middle-school English teacher at the private Webb School of Knoxville in Tennessee, said of the first few months of the school year. "We didn't know if it was going to work or not. We were in the middle of an experiment."

White, 47, is used to being an energetic and involved teacher who roams the classroom interacting with students and encouraging them in learning. But he spent much of this year masked-up and cordoned off, keeping a 10-foot distance from his students. Staying safe meant retreating from hands-on lessons, it meant being quiet more and lively less. The year was a challenge, but he's now able to see its value in different ways.

"If you were to ask me in November, I would have told you I'm looking for another career," White said. "But I believe now we have had this collective educational experience. We're going to be like those generations that experienced the Great Depression. We're going to have these 'remember whens' that start to give us this cohesive experience educationally."

As wearing as the school year was, none of the nine teachers said it would cause them to leave the profession. Instead, some said they felt more committed to their work and especially to the young students looking to them for instruction and guidance. And it also made them rethink some of their ideas about teaching.

Justin Lopez-Cardoze, a seventh-grade science teacher at Capital City Public Charter School in D.C., spent the entire school year teaching virtually. In a normal year, he said, he would gauge student interest in the class by whether they raised their hands or how they communicated with peers. In the virtual setting, he noticed that students were engaged in different ways. They were often more comfortable writing questions or responding to their peers in a chat box.

"I think the platform that we have used for the past year has retrained me about what authentic learning looks like," said Lopez, 31. "I can't just measure the success of learning by seeing that a student is enthusiastic to raise their hand or a student is being super talkative about a content they're

learning.”

The digital platforms used in virtual learning “will definitely remain as integral components in the classroom because of how accustomed students and staff have grown to using them and seeing success with them,” said Lopez, who will become the vice principal at his school next year.

### [Pandemic teaching, in their words](#)

Not all teachers feel the right lessons were learned during the pandemic. And they worry there won’t be an impetus to adopt what worked from distance learning into a new framework.

“This was an opportunity to really make change for education and to really blow it up and redevelop it. And I don’t think that’s happened,” said Mathews, 44, who has 20 years of experience. “I feel like we’re just trying to cling on to the hope of, ‘Oh, let’s get back to the old way.’ But it wasn’t working to begin with, so why should we try to force this new world into that old structure?”

The challenges teachers faced often differed with the age of the students they taught and the backgrounds from which they come.

For Abouhamad, 36, who teaches in a low-income district in California’s central valley, the biggest challenge was overcoming equity issues. Students were often in homes with poor Internet connections or they were having to take care of younger siblings while their parents worked. Some students were holding down jobs of their own to help their families with bills. Many students were the only English-speakers in their household.

“Normally, you can kind of establish structure in the classroom enough to compensate for what they’re not getting at home, but there was no

combating the disadvantages from the home front this year," he said.

Their beloved teacher died of coronavirus. Then the governor said schools had to reopen. How an Arizona school picked up the pieces in a year unlike any other. (Erin Patrick O'Connor/The Washington Post)

Andrea Ainsworth, who is married to Abouhamad, began the school year as a substitute teacher at Waverly Elementary School in Linden, Calif. But as coronavirus infection rates climbed in the fall and hybrid classes began, Ainsworth, 36, worried about getting sick and spreading the disease to her husband, who is immunocompromised. When the school asked her in November to stay through the end of the year, she declined.

As was true for many teachers, the availability of the coronavirus vaccine changed her outlook about being in a school filled with students, faculty and staff. It wasn't until after she and Abouhamad were vaccinated earlier this spring that she returned to substituting.

"I was definitely more comfortable being in the classroom when I was vaccinated and my husband was vaccinated and we knew the ability to spread the virus was super low," Ainsworth said.

Lh eritier, who works with younger children, said she also felt much safer once she was finally vaccinated. But even as she worried about getting sick or getting others sick, she wanted to keep concern about the pandemic out of the school lives of her charges.

"My goal at the beginning of the year was to provide as normal an experience as possible because childhood is so brief and fleeting and it's not the kids' fault that there's a global pandemic," said Lh eritier, 44. "So my goal really was to make this as peaceful and happy and educational a place as it could be."

[\*How the pandemic is reshaping education\*](#)

All of the teachers cited their relationships with students for helping them endure a difficult year and reminding them of why they became teachers in the first place.

"The number one reason why I got into this profession is to make connections with students. And that was incredibly difficult to do this year," said Myron Curtis, 36, who teaches history and coaches football at Broad Run High School in Loudoun County, Va.

For much of the year, the classes were online only and forging relationships was especially difficult. And even after hybrid learning was introduced, only a few students returned to the classrooms.

**'You see ways that you can help make things better. And so you can't leave.'**

"In some ways it made me want to teach less, but it made me realize how important the job that I'm doing is," Curtis said. "I had my eyes opened to some of the inequalities in education. You see ways that you can help make things better. And so you can't leave. You know what I mean?"

Terence Freeman, a 73-year-old English teacher at Lawton High School in Lawton, Okla., is in his 41st year as an educator. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, Freeman said he brought his experience in the military to approach this unique year.

"It was just another test," Freeman said. And so you get things lined up and you adapt and change, you improvise."

At the beginning of the year, Freeman provided gloves for each of his students so that they could share textbooks without sharing the virus. Wiping down desks, washing hands and putting on the assigned gloves was

part of the pre-class regimen for all the students. They were masked and disinfected and ready to go.

But the longtime teacher recognized that something was missing from the sterile classroom. And so at the beginning of each week, Freeman stopped at a local grocery store to buy flowers which he placed around his classroom. He wasn't sure his students would even notice but soon they were commenting on them and even walking over to smell the flowers through their masks. And if he forgot to bring flowers they reminded him.

Freeman said that in some ways the year brought he and his students closer together and he considers it one of his most successful teaching experiences. As for returning next year, he has no doubts.

**'It has always been an absolute joy just to get up and come in and teach, and this year has done nothing to dampen that.'**

"There's not a day goes by that somebody doesn't say, 'Well, how long you going to stay in this?'" Freeman said. "But I actually look forward to it. It has always been an absolute joy just to get up and come in and teach, and this year has done nothing to dampen that."

For Estes-Swilley, 51, the day she'll remember most from this year was the final time she gathered her AP students together before they sat for exams.

"When I told them it was time to go, I said I would stand at the door and asked them to show me their faces briefly as they walked out. I wanted to really see them," Estes-Swilley said. "I knew I'd be thinking about them all day and I just needed faces. So they formed a line and as they walked out, each of them unhooked a mask from an ear and flashed me a smile as I exclaimed about my gorgeous students. When they were gone, I cried. When



I told my husband about it, I cried. I'm telling you and I'm crying."