

Take a Break: Schools should give contact tracers time to catch up



I'm a teacher in Providence, and since the beginning of this pandemic I've been asked by the Rhode Island Department of Health to quarantine twice. Once in July, the same day my name was mentioned to a contact tracer, and a second time the first week of school this year, two days after contact. Not bad. I had faith in the contact tracing system, even after being quarantined so early in the school year.

We now have had two full months in school. Gone are the days of a quick turnaround by RIDOH. Now, if you're lucky to even get a call, teachers and students are being told about quarantining a week after contact. Sometimes ten days.

Look at that timeline. We went from being told the day of, to 48 hours, to seven to 10 days. Think of what you do in seven days. It's seven to 10 days of going about your daily business, maybe the grocery store, possibly a restaurant. It's certainly not isolating from your family in your own home, which is what you're asked to do while quarantining. It's sending your child to school or your partner to work, all the while not knowing you could be positive. And if you are, now your family could be spreading it to *their* schools or workplaces.

RIDOH appears to be so backed up now, that I feel guilt if I have to go to Dave's Market to grab bread. To say that school being in session hasn't put a burden on RIDOH, many of whom are brand new to the job, would be a logical fallacy.

If you've ever read something I've written before you know I love and mainly talk about two things; live theater and education. I love being a teacher. In fact I often say it's not a job, it really feels like a

calling. I love nothing more than that moment when a student “gets it.” Generally in my classroom that moment is followed by me jumping up and down and using my best Rhode Island accent to exclaim that they are “wicked smaht.” I love the days where we move all the desks, “circle up” and discuss the novel we’re reading, or the collaborative lesson on the power of words where the entire class has to put together something they collectively “destroyed,” all the while I’m counting/singing down to add suspense (and because quite frankly it’s just way more fun that way).

Of course with COVID, these things can’t happen. I’ve had to adjust my lessons to be socially distant, and adaptable for online work. And that’s okay because I am up for the challenge, and more importantly, my students are up for the challenge. We do, however, expect the state to hold up their end of the bargain, and that includes contact tracing. And here’s the thing: It’s not the state’s fault that they’re this backed up; between the new contact tracers and the growing numbers, it’s no wonder that they’re backed up. It *is* that state’s fault if they keep their blinders on.

The Department of Health needs a break. They need to breathe. Schools need to switch to distance learning while the contact tracers are trained, and have time to catch up. And it’s not like schools aren’t already doing this. Some private schools have been switching to distance learning when they get one case to give contact tracers time to notify all contacts. (Don’t hold your breath waiting for the governor to call them out on it, especially when she sends tuition to a private school that has temporarily switched to distance learning already this year.) There are charter schools that have made the decision to choose distance learning for their students, and there are some public school communities that have decided from time to time to switch to distance learning while things calm down. These are rational and appropriate decisions to make. It gives custodians the extra time for deep cleans, and it gives RIDOH time to catch up with the ever important contact tracing. Yet when the public schools make these choices, Governor Raimondo bullies them from her press conferences and maligns them in the media. (The fact that she remains quiet when private schools and public charter schools do the same illustrates her disdain of unionized teachers. But the vast inequities in Rhode Island education could fill an entire book.)

I am a highly effective teacher, and I love being in the classroom. But because of my job I feel like the only thing I can do without unintentionally harming others is go to work and come straight home. I’m too nervous to see my friends or my family. I’m not taking the governor’s advice and going out to eat in restaurants. I’m not out shopping. For the most part I go to school and go home. But am I harming the people in my own home by not wearing a mask in my house?

Without confidence in the contact tracing system, what choice is the governor giving educators, and the additional staff members in schools? I love teaching, I often joke around with the saying #teacherlife when speaking of grading and the silly things that happen throughout a day, but is the state of Rhode Island trying to force teachers into #hermitlife? I’m also speaking as a parent here. If I don’t know for seven to ten days that I’ve been exposed, how do I protect my family? Teachers don’t live in a bubble, but this serious lapse in contact tracing is asking us to.

I beg the state of Rhode Island to take a breath, pause and give the contact tracers the time to do their job. We have a statewide calendar, and Thanksgiving week is only two school days. Switch to distance learning through the Thanksgiving break, give the contact tracers that time to catch up and give families what they really want this holiday season: peace of mind.