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## NJ schools have good reason to worry they won't have enough teachers, substitutes this fall

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After 20 years of teaching at Clifton T. Barkalow Middle School in Freehold Township, Leslie Rubins wasn't ready to slow down and had planned to continue for at least another four years.

But mounting worries about the coronavirus and fear it could seriously affect her and her family prompted a decision: Rubins is making an early exit.

“As of Sept. 1, I will be retiring and it was not my plan,” Rubins said in an interview, fighting back tears. “It was actually a very tough decision for me, I love teaching. My family and I made the decision for a number of reasons. My husband is older than me and I am in my 60s.”

**Middletown:** School reopening committee is a BIG deal (as in lots of people)

Rubins, 61, said she believes her district and others are doing the best they can to protect students and staff, but that is not enough: “I am quite aware of what that (having in-person instruction) will do in the next few months; we will have to see more people getting ill.”

Rubins is one of dozens of Jersey Shore teachers who are taking early retirement, spurred by worry they might contract the coronavirus and transmit it to vulnerable friends and family, administrators say.

School officials, who have a growing list of concerns ahead of the new school year, worry about the loss of such talented and experienced teachers.

Likewise, the officials worry about the health of teachers left behind, mindful they could be sidelined by the disease or requests they be allowed to teach remotely.

The practical reality is, the officials say, is some teachers will become infected and need to stay away for weeks at a time.

**Toms River superintendent predicts remote-only school: 'We are not opening in September'**

That has sparked new outreach for substitute teachers and made scheduling even more challenging, with officials having to accommodate both virtual and in-person instruction.

“There is a real fear of the unknown and the potential for people becoming ill and dying,” Richard Bozza, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, said about teacher concerns. “With staff members we don’t know if they are going to be impacted with health conditions.”

**COVID what's next:** Medical unknowns still biggest problem for NJ schools in new year

Several district officials say many of their teachers fall into the categories of being more vulnerable, due either to health conditions — such as diabetes or heart problems — or their ages. Teachers already are requesting leaves or exemptions to teach remotely.

“The risk factor allows them to take that leave,” said Scott McCue, superintendent of the Eatontown School District, who said more retirements are also being considered among his staff. “There are a number of teachers contemplating retirement depending on how this goes. We have staff members approaching that age category and they are saying depending on how it goes after September that will determine if they stay on.”

Gov. Phil Murphy recently announced that schools must reopen in the fall for all students who wish to attend in person, but also allow for any student who wishes to continue with remote learning only.

Administrators are in the process of formulating those plans, some of which have already been announced.

**Health:** NJ doctors fear patients put off crucial care over COVID fears

Many say the uncertainty over how many teachers will be available, and how many might have to leave their jobs — permanently or temporarily — due to the virus, adds another headache to an already difficult situation.

“I had five teachers retire this year, one was definitely due to COVID concerns,” Freehold Borough Superintendent Rocco Tomazic said via email. “Five teachers is slightly more than

the norm. Replacing retiring teachers is not a major concern. The bigger challenge is to cover teachers who may be out for underlying medical reasons using the expanded leave and sick day provisions, or those needing the same to cover child-care issues. My per diem substitute pool may be stretched beyond capacity to meet high demand in that regard.”

McCue pointed out that the state’s lengthy guidelines for returning to school issued weeks ago include a provision allowing teachers to request “reasonable accommodations” if they are 65 or older or if they fall into the list of underlying medical conditions.

**Reopening NJ:** Gov. Phil Murphy says high school sports will 'get there'; Cranford wins Last Dance baseball

He took that to mean they could request a leave of absence or a remote work assignment, adding to the scheduling difficulties already in place.

“If I have 30 teachers out of a staff of 120 who want to work at home I may not be able to provide that. We are taking each request in writing and looking at if it matches up to the guidance,” McCue said. “If I have a teacher who requests a reasonable accommodation, I may be able to assign them a remote teaching assignment. It gets challenging if I, say, have a school nurse who needs an accommodation for a health issue.”

He said his district is currently planning for a hybrid approach, with half the students in on "A" days and half on "B" days, and those who are off site learning remotely.

Other district leaders offered similar concerns on the need for substitutes, with several noting that an already short supply of the daily temporary teachers will only get worse as demand likely jumps.

“We have concerns about unplanned absences and the need for additional substitute personnel,” Mandie Peart, Holmdel Schools director of human resources and compliance said via email. “Prior to schools closing last spring, we expanded our substitute pool. However, some substitutes may be impacted by COVID-19 as well. We are also working with an organization to supplement our substitute pool so if we are unable to fill a position within our existing pool, they would deploy an approved substitute to our location.”

In Lakewood, school officials recently authorized spending more than \$1.5 million if necessary to hire dozens of substitutes each day to be on site in case of coronavirus-related staff absences or even sudden departures by teachers with symptoms.

**Ocean County:** Lakewood Board of Education approves plan to open schools, purchase classrooms and shields

“You don’t know if a teacher is sick sometimes until that morning,” said Michael Inzelbuch, Lakewood school district spokesman and school board attorney “We are going to need them regardless because of social distancing, to help during the day with students.”

The Lakewood Board of Education on July 22 voted to contract with GHR Education to provide at least 49 long-term substitutes each day beginning in September for a fee not to exceed \$1.58 million. They will be on the job regardless of need to provide support in non-teaching positions and if teachers need to leave suddenly or require a last-minute absence, Inzelbuch said.

That is in addition to the regular substitute pool used by the district that engages with Source4Teachers, a national substitute placement service.

“We are also looking into a third company to provide additional teachers, additional secretaries should we need them,” Inzelbuch added. “We are still negotiating with them.”

**Jersey Shore schools:** Offering remote learning and in-person instruction won't be easy

McCue said Eatontown has also increased its outreach for substitutes with additional classified ads and plans to assign substitutes each day at schools in case they are needed.

“Substitutes are really hard to find,” he said. “We have added a few more to our pool. We are going to continue with that outreach and will assign several substitutes on a daily basis for the first few weeks in case teachers suddenly need them.”

James Stefankiewicz, superintendent of the Ocean Township School District in Monmouth County, said he has had to increase his substitute search. But he said some substitutes may have their own coronavirus fears and vulnerabilities.

“It has made it more difficult now. Sometimes the substitutes are retired individuals who are already vulnerable to COVID and more reluctant to come in,” he said. “What that’s going to mean is a greater need for substitutes and that is a great concern. The pool is already thin for that and now we have to deal with this.”

He said some teachers may feel the need to stay home or opt out with minor symptoms that may not be coronavirus-related, but in the current atmosphere may cause more fears.

“A lot of people are very conscientious. A cold in the past may not have kept them home, they might have tried to come in. Now we are telling them to stay home,” Stefankiewicz said. “And that is even more challenging.”

**Education:** Jackson schools reopening with half-days, rotating students due to COVID-19

Bozza, of the Association of School Administrators, agreed: “There has been a shortage for a long time of substitutes. Everybody is going to the same pool. Substitutes are concerned as well. If their health is compromised they may not choose to be substitutes.”

He pointed out that both the student and teacher scheduling and health concern issues are sparking new calls not to open schools at all in September, except for remote learning. Three North Jersey legislators last week introduced a measure that would do just that.

“As a former board of education member and a public health nurse, I understand that New Jersey has made strong progress in combating COVID-19, but reopening schools for in-person instruction would feel like a step backward at this time,” Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, D-Essex, who heads the Assembly Higher Education Committee, said in a statement.

The bill proposed by Assemblywomen Jasey, Pamela Lampitt and Joann Downey would require schools to begin the 2020-21 year remotely, then evaluate on a monthly basis starting on Oct. 31 whether they should reopen. Special education and other services that must be delivered in person would be exempt.

Similar concerns have been raised nationwide, from teachers in Florida suing the governor over in-person teaching plans to Los Angeles teachers demanding that strict requirements be met before they return to work.

“What happens if I go down or I am exposed or someone in my home is exposed or gets sick, what are the options? A substitute comes in, but how is that handled?” said Traci Yostpille, president of the Freehold Township Education Association and second vice president of the Monmouth County Education Association. “And if one of my students gets sick, do I have to quarantine? This is our first pandemic and all of that needs to be thought through.”

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