

Teachers: Continue to be superheroes world needs



Editor's Note: This guest column is from 2020 Delaware Teacher of the Year Rebecca Vitelli, a special education preschool teacher in the Colonial School District.

"What superpower do you wish you could have?" A question posed by a friend to her 3rd grade students online sparked an important conversation as one student's answer stood out: "I would want the power to not get sick." In my preschool world, one family shared that their 4-year-old child with autism is having night terrors and waits at the door for the bus clutching her lunchbox. And my cousin, a teacher in New York, shared that, during a FaceTime playdate, his 5-year-old daughter said nonchalantly to her friend, "Maybe when we're *free* we can go to the movies?" Each of these anecdotes sets the scene for today's narrative: Whether they can articulate it or not, this new reality is affecting *kids* deeply. Whether we choose to share it or not, it is affecting *all of us* deeply.

Once perceived as a bit trite, this quote embellished on tee-shirts, coffee mugs, and posters has proven true: "Not all heroes wear capes...in fact, some have teaching degrees!" Educators, while our buildings may be closed for the year – our call to action is more urgent than ever. When we chose this profession, we never could have imagined this situation. Just as Iron Man longs for a day "when there aren't 20 crises to deal with, but not seeing that coming any time soon," we too are feeling overwhelmed by the needs of our students, families, and communities. And there is a silent mourning for the loss of what could have been. Perhaps you share some of these thoughts... Know you are not alone. EVERY teacher is doing his or her best. Your efforts do not go unnoticed.

Many of us are finding this change in reality difficult. We feel threatened by an invisible enemy and question ourselves often: Am I doing enough? What happens next? Am I making a big

enough impact? Am I connecting and reaching everyone? Am I being equitable? Am I doing enough for my own family and loved ones? Am I taking care of myself? As professionals, we take pride in our power to create safe, rich learning environments; now we lack much of that control. But our “Spidey sense” is tingling, and we abide by the credo that “with great power, comes great responsibility.” So we continue to bravely “suit up,” “zoom in,” and respond with open hearts. What the world needs is for us to focus on love, kindness, and compassion.

Now, more than ever, it is evident why relationships and connections are at the forefront of what we do. During these uncertain times, let us continue to teach and lead with empathy and unity. Let’s be guided by Wonder Woman’s philosophy, that “only love will truly save the world.” Social-emotional learning has never been more essential. Take the time to grieve and heal together – to talk about big feelings and emotions. Listen to your students and families. Be patient and give grace. And perhaps most importantly, give yourself the same love and consideration you are giving to others. Take some deep breaths as we all learn, process, and navigate uncharted territories together and in our own ways. By our example, how we choose to react, our children learn to respond. We owe it to kids to be our best possible selves so that we can model what it means to be flexible, to take chances and try new things, to work together, to ask for help, to *not* have all the answers, and to struggle and make mistakes. We are modeling what it means to be *human*. Self-care and family time is not selfish. Please tend to your mental health and the mental health of those you love. This virus isn’t only attacking our bodies.

There is no doubt about it, current circumstances are troubling. But, according to Superman, “A hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.” And isn’t that what we are all doing right now? Heroes represent hope, opportunity, and strength. So, teachers, I urge you to focus on the positives because “what you focus on, you will get more of.” Our utility belts expand as we push ourselves to learn new skills, technology, and instructional approaches that meet students’ needs through remote learning. And we *can* connect with *some* families more than ever before. Take time to *celebrate* your growth; both big and small victories matter as we unite with our students and families to persevere!

Of course, this pandemic has highlighted the many serious challenges of equity in education; not all children are able to access learning through a screen or on paper. We are battling unprecedented adversity, but as Stan Lee said, “We must never feel a cause is hopeless.” These times have underscored the true importance of and diverse roles we serve in our national health and well-being. Schools are not merely buildings where students learn; they are second homes where children are loved, fed, respected, safe, and supported by super teachers. We can emerge from this with a greater strength of character and a deeper understanding of humanity. We can use this time to fuel our passions and become the change we wish to see through advocacy and leadership.

As I ponder the many enigmas that command my introspections, one thing of which I am certain is that, teachers, *we are superheroes*. There is a REASON children are missing us. Know that WE are essential, our work vital. WE each make the world a better place by being a champion for students. So NEVER underestimate your value and your impact. I am forever in

awe of our nation's remarkable educators, the newly assembled team of Avengers who are rising to current challenges, inspiring our children and families with hope during difficult times, and transforming the world of education into something more meaningful than ever before. We are making our mark on history, as always, and we must keep going!

Great teachers are heroes in a world that has a lot to learn. While we may wear masks now, we don't need capes because we are lifted up by the amazing kids we teach, their families, and our comrades. We are stronger together and we will come out of this better than we went in. So unleash your superhero powers to fight for the good. And may we never forget that our worth depends on seeing the worth in others.