

FINAL: Jimmy Halpin

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Teachers are on the front lines during Covid, and New York City's public schools have had their ups and downs. We're here with New York City elementary school teacher Jimmy Halpin to get his take on what's happening. Welcome, Jimmy. Thank you for joining us today.

JH: Thank you for having me.

VC: Tell us about your school and I know it's a "Title 1" school, and tell the listeners exactly what that is?

JH: Okay. I teach at a public elementary school and middle school. It runs from Pre-K through 8th grade in Harlem on 121st Street. I've been there now for the last 14 years. The school is known as a "Title 1" school which is a classification for schools where there's a very high percentage, I'm not exactly sure of the number, but something as high as 75% or 80% of the children live at or below the poverty level.

VC: What does that mean to your school when you have this type of student population?

JH: So as a result of that, you make the correlation that a lot of the students that we serve are living in shelters, temporary housing and in the foster care system. And so the school, first and foremost we're there to educate them in a very traditional way with the subject content that's appropriate for the grade they're in, but much more so my school serves, although it's not classified as, serves as some type of community building. A great deal of the children come there for breakfast, are served lunch, and stay through dinner. There are after-school programs for the kids if their parents sign them up for them and the school is open on weekends, we used to, prior to the pandemic we had Saturday school which would incorporate academics and some kind of art class, science lab, just things for them to do on Saturdays as well, again with the primary focus being their formal education, socialization, and unfortunately for some of them, it might be the only access to food that they might have. And clothing is given, we have a big closet full of clothes, wonderfully generous people over the years have donated things and various organizations.

KK: We find that every day something new is happening in the school district and now we learn that they are now going to go back in New York City in March, certain classes 9-12. What classes do you teach and what grade?

JH: I teach the third grade. At the beginning of the school year, if I remember this correctly, there have been several changes. We began with a hybrid model where the students came to my room two or three days a week, like an A-B schedule. You couldn't have in excess of ten children in a room at the same time due to the CDC guidelines and the social distancing that they have in place so maximum for my room would be 12 people. I have a paraprofessional in the

room with me so that's another adult, so I had ten students, then it went to five days a week that I was in the building. So I've been pretty much in the building teaching this class of ten students five days a week pretty much consistently since right before Thanksgiving.

KK: Well, the other classes, do they do remote?

JH: Yes. I'll use my class as an example but this is true of all elementary, the grade school. The K through 5, if your parents opted to send you to school, you would have a teacher for your in-person instruction. The overflow, the families who decided to keep their children, or chose, rather to keep their children at home then would have another instructor for the third grade material and that teacher and I would work together every morning. We have a preparation period first thing in the morning from 8-8:30 every day to just check in with each other to see where we are to ensure that the children are getting as close to the same instruction as possible.

KK: Since this is a "Title 1" school, and part of it has been done virtual, who has paid for the technology? Did you get sufficient technology?

JH: Yes. I'll speak for myself, and I imagine a lot of the staff would also agree with me. We have a wonderful principal who has been in that building, I would think somewhere close to 20 years now. He's very well-known and respected in the community and as a result of his outreach program and people who know him and our students over the years, again through various grants and donations, our technology has never really been an issue at our school. They might not be the most up-to-date or the best but every child in that building had access to some type, whether it be ... they had brand new iPads this year I noticed. There were laptops. It was a bit of a slow rollout but this came out of nowhere last year but ultimately it seemed to me that everyone was being served and we have a wonderful team of an outreach program of coordinators who, it's solely their jobs to make sure that the children have connectivity and access to devices, would be there if a parent wanted to return the device, switch it out, all of that type of stuff.

VC: Did you have any connectivity issues with those students who were remote when you were working with them?

JH: Not really, no. I can't really remember any ongoing. On any given day I have them myself sometimes but for the great majority of the time the children that I worked with were able to log on without much incident. That wasn't the issue. It really wasn't an issue at my school.

VC: What was your biggest issue?

JH: Oh, it was definitely, it was profoundly sad; to try to teach 8 and 9 year olds on an electronic device, things that they just need to be taught in person. It just doesn't work with young children. No human being, never mind an 8 year old, should be sitting at a computer learning to read, write and do math. You have to engage in conversations, the playfulness, and the joy that comes with school. Everyone's home is different. I don't know, if you're in a home with three children and you had to like work, and you could hear others – a student in my class had a sibling in another class. I could hear the other teacher's voice, you know, the brother or the

sister trying to answer the question and a mother, grandmother or father or uncle or whoever is home with them, might have something that they needed to do and cats, and dogs – chaos.

KK: It's very, very difficult. I think people are now coming around to see, open schools, they're safe. I don't know about the teacher's union, you're part of that?

JH: Yes, I am

KK: Did you have to get tested regularly?

JH: The city in coordination with the teacher's union did a great job. It was very safe, you know, there's random testing done. Twenty percent of the school population gets tested every week, so 20% of the faculty and 20% of the students. I have been vaccinated, fully vaccinated since February 12th but I was tested again this past Friday and I found out today, I got a phone call saying it was negative. So I've been tested several times throughout the school year. I always felt safe there.

VC: Yeah, I was going to ask you in terms of that, how safe you feel in the building and do you feel the ventilation is adequate?

JH: At one point early on I came into work and there was a machine in the back of the room that looked like a mini refrigerator and that was some kind of new ventilator that they put in there. We have a wonderful custodian staff that walks around the building several times a day and wipes things down. I leave the windows open unless it's unbearably cold and then I just crack them, the door is open. But the best is there are only ten children in the room. You know, under normal circumstances, I would have a class of somewhere from 24 to 30 children. I don't know if I would have felt safe in that case, to be honest with you. You know, because children, they're on top of each other and that's the nature of children. And, they should be on top of each other; they should be able to pass things to each other and swipe things from each other, fuss over a book or whatever it is that kids do. But in this way, it's abnormal but it's what works and I don't know when it'll ever, it will God willing, go back to normality but I don't know when that's going to take place and again, as you may know from your reading, it's the older children, the high school children they're concerned that they might be spreading this the most, because they would be in good health, asymptomatic – it gets very messy as they get older. The little ones don't seem to be spreading it, from what I can tell.

VC: What is a typical day like for you?

JH: Okay, so for years now I've been getting up at 5:00 in the morning and whether I'm off or working, I don't know if that's middle age or the job that I have. Once you're at that school and those children are in your charge it's all systems go, like you know what I mean, it's like being shot out of a cannon. This year hasn't been quite like that, so I get there are 8:00AM, I plan with my co-teacher until 8:30AM, the children are now brought upstairs, I used to have to go downstairs to pick them up, they're given breakfast, they eat their breakfast at their desks, which are all spread out and that goes on for about half an hour, 40 minutes, we do a bit of a social/emotional check-in, if you will, like just a meter to see how everyone's feeling. At the

beginning it was more like Covid-based, like the strangeness of all this, how do you feel, but then you know, children are remarkably resilient. The ones that I have are not walking around worried particularly worried about a virus, so then it moved away from that. I would find videos on exercise, I like to exercise so I would exercise with them and just other kinds of videos on math fractions or multiplication tables and then it would start academics from 9:30AM pretty much till 11:40AM when another worker in the school would come in for lunch. They stay with me all day, that's the difference. They're not allowed to go around the building. They used to have the opportunity to go to other classes, like they would go to gym, or have a science lab or a technology lab – they're with me all day.

KK: Through all this, how involved have the parents been?

JH: I've had a decent amount of involvement with the parents. I have ten students; we just had parent-teacher conferences. Years ago, in a class of 24 to 30 kids I would only have about half of the people respond to that or come into the building. This time it was the zoom calls and telephone calls, I got ten out of ten parents, they were all there, and they were all interested in their children's well-being. I've always been the type of teacher that felt comfortable giving my – it was just easier with the cell phone, call me, if I don't answer I'm busy, I'll get back to you, and they understand that. Our school, at its height, when it's working well, there are a lot of people in and out of the school, parents come, some, they might be unemployed; they hang out in the teacher's lounge. And then there are some children that, sadly, their parents are not involved but it's not a great number of them.

VC: Just so the listeners have an idea of the kind of place where you work, could you just describe your school building? Is it an old building? Is it a new building?

JH: It was built in 1964, so it's a little bit on the older side. It's very typical of a public school in the city. It's on a beautiful street in Harlem, on 121st Street that is all a row of brownstones and then you come to the end of the brownstones and there's our school. And then there are delis or bodegas, as people call them, around the corner, there are some smaller apartment buildings across the street. There's a nice little school yard that was just renovated a few years ago, another grant someone gave us. The first floor you'll find the office and all the classrooms but what is very – and then I'm up on the second floor and I love my classroom. There's tons of sunlight coming in, and there's a little wear and tear but it's very, very clean and tended to and I try to keep it as inviting and pleasant looking as possible. I've had generous friends over the years donate things so I've got some decent books, nice pillows for the kids to sit on, the snack cabinet, they love it, they're working on something and you give them some pretzels or cookies or something, you know, and yeah, it's a pleasant looking place. It's hard work. This year, this sounds like a sacrilege to say, it hasn't been as physically draining as a normal school year but it's been much more emotionally draining. Like there's sadness to it. There's no noise, you can hear the school if you're on the street you can tell there's a school down the block. Now you would just think that maybe on any given day even when we're fully operational there's no one in there.

VC: Have you had any of your students, staff or maybe parents or families affected by Covid?

JH: Yes. Early on this time last year my co-teacher, she tested positive for Covid very shortly after the schools having been closed. My closest friend in the building was expecting a baby, I think her daughter was born on April 10th, she found out she had Covid when she was giving birth, when she went into the hospital to give birth so that was a whole very scary, having to go it alone, she wasn't sure if her husband, there was a time when the partner wouldn't be allowed in the hospital. There have been some people who got very sick.

VC: Or like students, students' families that you know of?

JH: I know students' family members, like parents, who had Covid but I don't think there have been any deaths.

VC: What would you like to see happen post-pandemic, you know more people are being vaccinated, there seems to be somewhat of a small movement towards opening up a bit by bit.

JH: The pandemic, and it just being a little bit of a slower pace. I would like people to remember that going into next year. Of course, we want everyone back, fully operational. I don't know what is planned, I know the mayor made some kind of announcement recently that you'll have the option of staying at home or coming to school but you won't get offered a hybrid model. What we will have learned from this is that we were always in such a rush to achieve and strive, and data and accountability. Of course, you always have to be accountable but student and test scores, that doesn't seem as important to me right now. So it's been a nice opportunity to slow down the pace, because we whiz through, even in the third grade. You would be shocked at how quickly you have to get through these lessons and curriculum, maps and dates and when this is due, when people are coming to visit and look over what you've done. I haven't missed any of that so my hope is that all the kids will come back. There will be appreciation of being able to go back that will somehow be manifested in a little bit more of an ease to it, less uptight about product and pushing. Does that make sense?

VC: It most certainly does. So you're saying more focus on the actual process of educating?

JH: Yes. You know, everyone learns differently and the whole process of educating, again with the class of ten, I have some children who really are struggling even in the third grade to read. That's not my school's fault, it's just the way the system is built. You know it was nice to have a smaller number of children. If I had 24 or 25 children, it takes you a couple of weeks to realize that you have children sitting in your room that really might need some outside instruction, whereas here you see it immediately every day. It's easy for children to get lost in the shuffle of the floodgate once it opens. Once the school year started it's like getting on a train and you just hold onto it until you get off in June.

VC: So what advice do you have for parents and other teachers and students?

JH: For parents, being one myself, again with this whole idea of achievement, where my kid was and where will they be, we're all in the same boat. So no one's getting a leg up on you. But all, from private schools to public schools, we were all hit with this. So hopefully, it's giving everyone a reason to pause. So for parents I would just want to release that feeling of always

rushing to what's coming next. I have a daughter who's a sophomore and a daughter who's a freshman. The sophomore is only 15 and people are already like, "where's she going to a college?" It's like well, she's a sophomore in high school so why would I even answer that question? That type of thing. There's a lot of push for that. Children? I hope that they are getting outside when the weather changes, get some kind of socialization more than anything else. I think that's really important. The younger ones, you have eight years of that -- Kindergarten, high school for four years, college is four years ... then you get to be an adult for the rest of your life. That's it. You're hustling for a job to pay your bills. So these years are all crucial, they're all such milestones. But again, academically but socially and emotionally, all the whispers, the jokes and the friendships and the things that make that small precious window of being a child, why people look back on their childhoods fondly, all of these kids have been robbed of that. I just hope they can get out, hang out and have fun.

VC: Yes, childhood is something that goes by all too quickly. You blink and it's gone right? So is there anything you'd like to discuss, bring up that we haven't covered?

JH: No, other than this whole idea like I do work for New York City and education and all of that, but in the bigger picture of New York City, I don't like this narrative that the city is dead, the city is over. New York City is thriving, the schools are opening, and I only have that one little classroom. The kids that come into my room have done the best they can under some really horrible circumstances, vaccines are coming so it's a great time to be hopeful and grateful and I've lived in New York City my entire life and it's the greatest city in the world.

VC: Well, we couldn't agree more. Kat and I are both native New Yorkers and we're with ya!

KK: New Yorkers are strong. They don't fall easily.

VC: Well, Jimmy, thank you so much for sharing all of your experiences, your insights, your knowledge with us.

JH: Well thank you both.

VC: I just wanted to say also, I think your students are very lucky to have you as their teacher.

KK: Yes.

JH: Thank you.