**JANUARY 10, 2022 / NO SUBSTITUTES FOR THE SUBSTITUTES**

**[2 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**

**[THEME]**

HALEEMA SHAH (guest host): It’s Today, Explained. I’m Haleema Shah. For a lot of students around the country, winter break ended over a week ago…but many are still stuck at home. Today on the show, we’re diving into the deep-seated labor issues behind the latest round of school building closures. But first, we’re turning to our friends at Cramer Hill Elementary School in Camden, New Jersey. We’ve been checking in with them throughout the pandemic to see how they’re dealing with Covid-19. Here’s Principal Jessie Gismondi.

JESSIE GISMONDI: (principal, Cramer Hill Elementary School): Our school building is not open for students today. We are all remote. However, we do have another vaccine clinic going on today at the school so kids can come up to either get a PCR or rapid test if they're not feeling well, or they can actually get their vaccine today at school. So that's exciting. So even though we're in virtual learning, the building is open for things like food service because we still like to provide meals to our families and community, tech support if your computer is not working, or PCR COVID tests.

HALEEMA: What went into the decision to go remote for students?

JESSIE: So actually, I'm pretty lucky because my school is a part of a charter organization. And just before the winter holiday, I think it was 10 schools had to move to virtual learning because the threshold of positive COVID cases was above three percent, which at the time was the county's metric for positivity rates that forced a school closure. So the CEO and our COO sort of made the decision that if 10 schools were already at this threshold, we wanted to really be prepared after the holiday where everyone was suggesting like there is now a surge in COVID cases. So they wanted to proactively close the schools so that we could get kids the computers we could share with parents what it would be like after the holiday. And so now we are virtual because our positivity rates were above the threshold, and this was just a proactive decision to sort of keep everybody safe until we can test and see what our community transmission rate is.

HALEEMA: And how are parents and kids reacting to the decision to go virtual after winter break?

JESSIE: I think that like every single parent and kid where you might have one parent say, I need to have my kids back in school, you then might have another parent say, I don't want my kid back in school. So it's a real mixed bag, to be perfectly honest. It's this crazy duality, right? Where parents both desperately want their kids at school and also want to keep their kids safe from COVID. And similarly, with kids, I think kids, the number one thing that we heard was “this is a bummer,” or “I'm finally able to hang out with my friends and it felt so good to be back and now I'm back at home again.” So I think that they also don't want to get COVID because then they can't hang out with their friends at all.

HALEEMA: And how is staff responding?

JESSIE: I think when the network decided to do virtual learning for the two weeks after winter break, even, like, from my house, I could hear the audible sigh of relief from staff members because they wanted to be able to see their families over the holiday. They wanted to be able to celebrate. They wanted to be able to do all of these great things, and they know what that might mean in the middle of this Omicron surge. I think that right now we would not have been able to keep our schools safe with the amount of teachers that we have that are positive. But what's great is that all of those teachers have mild enough symptoms where they can teach virtually.

HALEEMA: And how many teachers are currently sick right now?

JESSIE: Currently, we have about 10 folks that we know of that were positive between the Christmas holiday and currently on, you know, early January. So some of them are already finished their 10 day quarantine. But from the start of break, it was like it's a roughly a dozen staff members. And just for context, I have 95 staff members, so it's about 10 percent of my staff.

HALEEMA: Wow.

JESSIE: Yeah. We know virtual learning is not as effective as in-person learning, but it's better than having 15 substitutes in the school at one time.

SCORING IN - INDIA MELODY

HALEEMA: So you knew school would be virtual after the holidays. How did the school prepare for that?

JESSIE: From Thanksgiving until winter break. It was a feeling of “we're on the brink.” It was like this understanding that we're going to teach as hard as we can and we're going to push as much as we can because the unknown after the holiday was so real and like so tangible, you'd have teachers come in to you in a meeting and say things like, “Yeah, I only have 17 out of 28 kids in-person today” or things like “strangely, I haven't seen such-and-such’s brother or sister in ten days.” You know, so I think that the proof was in the pudding, like people really knew that folks were getting more and more sick. And so unlike March of 2020, where we had to go virtual with nothing. What we did is we really use December to re-teach kids, OK, when you log on to Zoom, here's what you click to get your assignment. When you're online, here's the curriculum platform. Here's what it's going to look like. And teachers from kindergarten to 8th grade actually practiced that with students so that in January we would actually have a little bit more success. And I think that that predictability allowed us to feel a lot better about going virtual because it's, I mean, horrible. It's terrible.

SCORING OUT - INDIA MELODY

HALEEMA: So now it is January. How are students performing now?

JESSIE: This is probably the best round of virtual learning that we've ever had. It's like we finally have a great playbook and we're running the place and then we're running the plays that we've practiced and that we've perfected and that we've communicated. So that feels great. Our attendance is above 75 percent, which is awesome for virtual learning. Just for some context, in-person, we have above 93 percent every day. So it's definitely a drop. But we've been able to then communicate with parents because some parents will say, “Look, I work all day and I send my kid to a babysitter, and Zoom is just not going to happen, but I'll finish all the assignments later that night.” So at least we have the opportunity to like, talk to families that aren't online for the live learning and for the ones that aren't. We know that we will be back within a few days or a week or two, so that will be able to catch them. So it doesn't feel like a total waste, but it's it's definitely like a pause button. Like, we can't go as fast as I think we would want to right now.

HALEEMA: I have enough friends who are teachers to know that during the pandemic, there have been a lot of tears in the parking lot and a lot of burnout. Are you concerned about your staff’s mental health?

JESSIE: I think that the mental health issues coming out of the pandemic and how it affects schools is quite honestly the number one thing that I'm worried about at this point. We constantly refer to ourselves as a family at Cramer Hill, like our teaching staff is really close, and they're really supportive. But we've gone now almost three weeks without seeing each other, without talking to each other, without checking in to see whose family is sick, who's not. And I've been trying my best to text folks and check in and have a Zoom meeting, but it's really hard to do without adding more screen time on for staff, I want to honor that as well. But I am truly, truly, truly worried about, like, the state of mental health, of our staff and our employees of how scary this is coming back because we're supposed to come back next week and the surge isn't over. The peak isn't over. But all of the guidance from the community health departments are saying that schools are safe, which just kind of seems counter to then what everything says on the news about how not safe our world is right now with Omicron.

HALEEMA: Your school is scheduled to go back to in-person learning Tuesday, January 18th. Do you think that that will actually happen?

JESSIE: I do. I do think that it will happen. So a lot of the local health departments as well as CHOP, which is a children's hospital here in Philly, right outside of Camden. Are saying that the transmission rates in school is not what's causing COVID transmission, it's the house parties and gatherings that people are doing indoors. But because schools use masking and other levels of safety precautions like we have air filters, we have social distancing with all those other things that they're saying that the mental health aspects of being out of school doesn't outweigh the transmission.

SCORING IN - DOWNTHINK

JESSIE: So I do think that we are going to open. I don't know how long we will stay open because if our in-school positivity rates go above the threshold that is considered safe by the health departments, then we'll have to close again. So with Omicron being where it is, I don't know how long we will stay open, but I do think that we will open on January 18th for at least a week or two, hopefully longer. But I don't really know what will happen after that.

HALEEMA: Jessie Gismondi is the principal at Cramer Hill Elementary in Camden, New Jersey. Coming up, why the latest round of classroom closures is different from the others. That’s in a minute on Today, Explained.

SCORING OUT

[MIDROLL]

HALEEMA: Anna North, Vox. You are a senior correspondent covering American work and family life. How many kids around the country are staying home after winter break?

ANNA: So a lot of American families are dealing with school closures coming out of winter break. At least 5,400 schools across the country closed their physical buildings for one or more days in the first week of 2022, according to the data service Burbio. Now, some of them are going to open back up this week, but others won't. And it's safe to say that for lots and lots of schools around the country, we are looking at disruption in the weeks ahead.

SCORING IN—INDIA MELODY ALTERNATIVE VERSION

ANNA: We're seeing a few different things going on here, although there are some of the same root causes involved. One is, some districts opted to close sort of preemptively so that everyone could get tested coming back from winter break.

*<CLIP> FOX SEATTLE: “Seattle public schools says students will be returning to in person learning following winter break. However they have just canceled the first day back.*

*<CLIP: BOSTON NBC: “So some districts, including Cambridge, decided to delay their reopening so students and staff have more time to get tested, and so they can plan for absences due to any positive results.*

ANNA: We saw some, some schools closing for one or two days, some closing for up to a week. In some cases, those districts are now back in person. There are also places, and Chicago as the main one I'm thinking of here, where there's a labor dispute going on.

*<CLIP> CBS CHICAGO: And its no school on Monday. That’s the word from CPS. The standoff with the teachers union over COVID precautions enters its second week.*

ANNA: Teachers have certain things they want before they would feel safe coming back to classrooms in person.

*<CLIP> JESSE SHARKEY (TEACHERS UNION PRESIDENT): If you want to get us back into the schools quicker provide testing. Do what New York has done, do what Los ANgeles has done, do what Cleveland has done. Do what the private school where the mayor sends her own child to.*

ANNA: The district and city officials have said No, we need to have in-person learning right now,

*<CLIP> CHICAGO MAYOR LORI LIGHTFOOT: When our district was fully remote, our children suffered. We saw triple the amount of failures in elementary school testing and learning. Triple!*

ANNA: and they're kind of at a standstill where schools have been closed because they can't agree.

SCORING OUT

ANNA: But then all around the country, there's also this wider issue, which is that it's just incredibly hard to staff a school right now.

*<CBS> PHILADELPHIA ACTION NEWS: New developments overnight have the Philadelphia School district switching even more schools to virtual learning for the entire week. This comes as districts across the region deal with staff shortages due to COVID 19*

ANNA: In some ways, we're at a more fortunate place in the pandemic than we used to be, and we have these vaccines that prevent severe illness and a lot of cases. But with Omicron, they don't necessarily always prevent transmission. So we're seeing these enormously high case counts and people getting sick and they need to quarantine. That means teachers need to quarantine. It means there might not be someone to teach your child's math class. It means there might not be someone to teach your child's English class. And when enough teachers are out, it becomes really difficult even to have school

*<CLIP> WPLG (BROWARD COUNTY NEWS) Because of the pandemic then the school district is already struggling with its substitute teacher pool. So they are assigning personnel who are not typically in the classroom to go back.*

*PRINCIPAL: If things continue to get worse we are going to hit that point where we more than likely need to double up some of our classrooms.*

ANNA: So you're seeing some districts preemptively closed because they're worried they won't be able to essentially operate a school. And I think in the weeks ahead, we're going to see more schools and classrooms have to shut down, potentially for a day or perhaps longer, simply because there aren't enough healthy teachers and staff to keep things open.

HALEEMA:How did we get to this point?

ANNA:We’vehad school closures since March 2020. At the very beginning of the pandemic, schools in all 50 states shut down to stem the spread of coronavirus. Now, a lot of folks hoped that with the vaccines, those closures would be over.

*<CLIP> FORMER NYC MAYOR BILL DEBLASIO: I’m very pleased to announce NYC public schools will fully reopen in September. Every single child will be back in the classroom.*

ANNA: And you know, in fact, we did see in early 2021 and especially towards the end of the 2020-2021 school year, a lot of schools did open up for in-person learning and people were really optimistic. And maybe the days of remote school are over. Now, Delta kind of messed that up. Delta was more transmissible than previous variants, and so it led to more kids, more teachers having to quarantine. That was really tough on kids and families. You know, it was tough for kids to have to miss school after they already missed so much school. And it was tough for parents to try to find, follow up childcare after they had already missed so much work. Not to mention that they themselves might also have been quarantining. But then these quarantines also really affected teachers and other school staff—everyone, all the adults that are in a school—because when a teacher was out sick or was out quarantining, someone had to cover their classes. That same thing is true for bus drivers, cafeteria workers, counselors, the school nurse, every adult in the school building. Those are essential jobs. Somebody has to do that work or the school can't function.

SCORING IN—INDIA MELODY (ORIGINAL)

ANNA: Now, usually substitute teachers would be able to fill in those gaps, at least in the classroom. But there's a big problem, which is that starting with the pandemic, a lot of districts started facing shortages of substitute teachers, in part because lots and lots of teachers had left the field since the pandemic began.

*<CLIP> CBS: A survey of teachers nationwide finds 28 percent say they’ve considered retiring early or leaving the profession due to stress and health concerns. This comes when there is already a shortage of qualified teachers.*

ANNA: So suddenly, you know, if your math teacher is out, ordinarily you could call on one of your regular subs, but that person isn't a teacher anymore. They're not substituting. And so suddenly you're left in a bind. A lot of a lot of schools have told me that when one teacher is out than another teacher just has to give up their prep period to go and cover that class. But what a teacher uses a prep period usually for is grading and planning the next day's classes. So suddenly they haven't graded any of their papers, they haven't planned the next day's classes. So all those students that were supposed to be in the next day's class, those kids are affected And it just gets worse and worse the longer the. Shortage goes on and the deeper it gets. So you hear about principals scrubbing toilets, you hear about the school guidance counselors are now teaching classes as substitutes, even though kids are facing a lot of mental health issues and they really need their guidance counselor. But so many teachers are out that the guidance counselor just has to step in.

*<CLIP> ABBOTT ELEMENTARY: Ava this is not handled. There is a 70 year old custodian who voted for Kanye teaching social studies right now. We need help.*

ANNA: All of this makes it harder and harder for schools to function and harder and harder for individual teachers to do their job on a daily basis. And that was hard even with the Delta variant. Now with Omicron, it's just turbocharged because this is so much more transmissible and so many more people are out sick on any given day.

SCORING UP AND OUT

HALEEMA:So school staff are basically working double duty in just about every way. What pandemic responsibilities are they now tasked with?

ANNA: So in addition to having to cover for their colleagues who are out sick or quarantining, there's a ton of other additional responsibilities that have been added to teachers’ plates since the pandemic began. So teachers and other school staff are now contact tracers. They're saying, you know, this kid sat next to their kid. This kid was positive. On this day, they're serving as almost like public health officials saying, you have to pull up your mask or this is safer. This isn't safe.

*<CLIP> ABBOTT ELEMENTARY: Teachers at a school like Abbott, we have to be able to do it all. We are admin. We are social workers. We are therapists. We are second parents. Hell sometimes we are even first. Mhmm.*

ANNA: And I had one teacher tell me that, you know, one thing that teachers really liked about their job before the pandemic is people really appreciated them. You know, people would thank them like, you would get this real, this real glow of doing something good for society. But now parents are really angry at teachers.

*<CLIP> BRANDON MICHON (ANGRY IDAHO DAD AT SCHOOL BOARD MEETING): The garbage workers who pick up my freaking trash risk their lives every day more than anyone in this school system! Figure it out!*

ANNA: there's been this sort of like parents versus teachers dynamic has developed during the pandemic. And to some degree, you know, lawmakers and candidates have kind of fueled this saying, you know, oh, it's teachers that are keeping schools closed when it's often more complicated than that. And so you've seen teachers really cast as the enemy and they feel that and they feel the anger. And you know what? What this one teacher told me is, like a lot of teachers don't feel the love from society anymore. It just makes it extra hard to do their job. You know, not only are they doing all this new stuff, but everyone's also mad at them.

HALEEMA: I guess it's not surprising then that so many teachers are quitting. But I gotta say, Anna, even *that* feels like an old problem, because teaching has always had high turnover rates. But now that the pandemic is making people pay attention: what’s the fix?

ANNA:I mean, we can start by paying teachers more.

SCORING IN—LADYBUG (TEX)

ANNA: In public education, pay has been really stagnating for decades. Teachers make 21.4 percent less than other workers with comparable education. That's as of 2018. And then bus drivers, cafeteria workers, substitute teachers, they're making even less. So, you're paying a pretty big wage penalty for being a public school teacher or being an adult that works in the public schools. And add to that the fact that it's really, really hard to do those jobs right now. One way to potentially stop so many people from leaving and maybe attract more people coming in would just be to raise the pay.

SCORING BUMP

ANNA: You know, folks talk about workload a lot. I think that's what a lot of teachers will point to. Even almost more so than pay in the public school system is just, you know, there needs to be more people to do these jobs. Obviously, none of this is a quick fix, but this pandemic isn't going to be over in the next couple of weeks, either. And if districts can really reckon with some of these big problems that the pandemic has exposed, then they can prepare for the next wave if and when that comes, and they can prepare for whatever crisis comes after that. You know, whatever that is and make it easier on educators and students and families.

SCORING BUMP

HALEEMA: Anna North covers work and family life for Vox. Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan with help from Hady Mawajdeh. I’m Haleema Shah, filling in for Sean Rameswaram…who will be back with us tomorrow. It’s Today, Explained.

SCORING UP AND OUT

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**