A new month of hope (with anxiety and uncertainty)

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Recent events prompted me to rewrite this column. I intended to focus on how we have entered a new month full of hope with the return of spring and the end of the mask mandate in schools, but the outbreak of war in Europe has created new anxiety and uncertainty.

As I write this on March 2, the democratic country of Ukraine is fighting for its existence. I am horrified by this unprovoked attack and the loss of civilian lives, including young children. We don’t know where this conflict will take us in the days, weeks, or months ahead, but there is much at stake, especially when it comes to those with nuclear weapons.

This conflict is creating what the UN predicts will become Europe’s largest refugee crisis of the century. At least 874,000 have already fled the country and up to 4 million may leave if conditions worsen. They understandably fled their country to survive, but what will happen to
the country they leave behind?

I cannot imagine the conditions or pain these individuals are feeling, but I do understand the complexity of what they’ll face as they seek permanent residency outside of Ukraine. As a child, I grew up moving back and forth between my native Puerto Rico and Albany. This meant navigating two different languages, cultures, and systems.

In Puerto Rico, I was not proficient enough in Spanish while in New York I was behind in English. In each situation I was viewed as the outsider and felt like someone without a consistent home or identity.

Fortunately, two of my elementary teachers recognized my situation and promise – and gave me extra attention and encouragement – something which forever changed my life. The Ukrainian refugees, both young and old, will need help. Early reports have shown ordinary citizens in Europe stepping up to mobilize food and resources.

Some children in the U.S. asked if this was the start of World War III. You may have noticed during the pandemic how observant they can be. Our children may not be old enough to fully understand what is happening (whether it’s war or a public health crisis), but they are aware of tension or trauma. Sometimes they can see on our faces without needing to see it for themselves.

What can we do to help them process something outside their control? The National Association of School Psychologists recommends the following when talking to children about violence (https://bit.ly/3hyQxhr):

1. Reassure children that they are safe
2. Make time to talk.
3. Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.
4. Review safety procedures.
5. Observe your child’s emotional state.
6. Limit TV or online viewing of this event.
7. Maintain a normal schedule.

As we enter March, we are nearing the end of the last quarter of the school year. Incredibly, this is now our third March of the pandemic. People are tired and frustrated, but we cannot let those emotions deter us from the bigger picture of why our schools exist.

Some have protested state requirements and directed their anger or frustration towards local school leaders who have no choice in the matter. Please understand that we are living in a time when no decision is going to please everyone, yet some have asked school leaders to defy state requirements. The reality is, if this happened, your district could face consequences and those protesting could be replaced by a different group of parents.
As the State Health Commissioner and State Education Commissioner wrote in a joint letter announcing new guidance on March 1, “the elimination of the state-wide universal mask mandate in schools will be met with relief by some, and concern and apprehension by others. This step is an opportunity for school leaders to reflect in leading conversations and interactions among individuals who have different beliefs and opinions. It is imperative that those making the personal choice to wear or not wear a mask, when it is not mandated, are not stigmatized, bullied, or made to feel uncomfortable.”

It is time for our schools to return to a sense of normalcy and away from COVID distractions and disruptions. Our schools are the center of many of our communities locally and across the state. These are special places where we have come together to support our children, where we celebrate their learning and achievements, and attend a wide range of events. I hope the return of a sense of normalcy will lessen the tension. We need to fight for our students – not with each other. We can disagree, but not in a way that disrupts the educational process for others.

I want to close with an abridged quote that a woman gave me while I was in Puerto Rico recently: “Destroying any nation does not require the use of atomic bombs or the use of long-range missiles … it only requires lowering the quality of education … The collapse of education is the collapse of the nation.”

Our schools are the foundation of our way of life, and we must work to protect it. They serve a dual purpose of preparing students for college and career as well as responsible citizenship. Moving forward, our challenge is determining how to best adapt and unite after two years of disruption and disagreement. I thank everyone for their collaboration as we have navigated one of the worst times in our history.

*This column will appear in the Register Star and The Daily Mail newspapers.*