

One Teacher's Experiences During the COVID-19 School Closures

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The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting lives around the world in many ways. Governments have temporarily closed schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. Here, an elementary school teacher shares her experiences making the shift to remote teaching.

I teach 5th grade in an urban school that serves the majority of the elementary-age English language learners (ELLs) in the city. The school population is 35% ELLs, and 47% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. The families at my school speak over 27 home languages; within my own class, six different languages are spoken at home.

When schools closed in response to the COVID-19 virus and we began online instruction, everyone in the school community needed to make adjustments. Three students in my classroom did not have internet for the first three weeks. After the decision was made to extend the closure for the remainder of the year, these families did find solutions so their children could access the internet to complete their lessons. Working together, the district, schools, teachers, and families were ready to bring schooling into the homes.

Taking the Curriculum Online

I feel lucky to be teaching 5th grade, because the district where I work provides Chromebooks for all students in 5th grade and above. This made the transition to online learning easier because students already used Google Classroom in their 4th- and 5th-grade classes on a daily basis. When organizing my Google Classroom materials, I did my best to mimic how students would interact with Google Classroom if they were in school. I also made a QuickTime screen recording explaining how to navigate Google Classroom, which many students and parents found helpful, as we did not have time to prepare students for this transition while still in school.

Instructionally, my district operates under the belief that all students have the right to a guaranteed and viable curriculum. This means that our content has been paced out with lesson resources and ideas provided to ensure that all students within the city are getting similar instruction. In the classroom, we use this curriculum as a starting point and then add and modify to fit the needs of our school and the varied needs of different students. When the school closure was announced, my district had already

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made a website where we could access three weeks of learning plans in all subjects for all grade levels (paper packets were created for younger grades). When the school closure was extended, curriculum leads began writing lessons for the remainder of the year.

With an online curriculum provided, continuing instruction was relatively easy. All that I needed to do was read the plans and transfer the information to a platform that my students were already comfortable using—Google Classroom. With Google Classroom, students have been able to complete work, access resources, and ask questions while completing work. I also have been making instructional YouTube videos to explain new concepts and provide instructions on how to navigate the technology to complete their work. QuickTime screen recording has become my new best friend!

Keeping the Social Emotional Benefits

In the classroom, I have students work in groups frequently. This is more difficult to achieve virtually, but I am trying to encourage the continuation of group work by reminding students that they can work together on assignments as long as they individually submit the work. Many of my students spend several hours a day video conferencing with one another before and after school, so I have tried to turn those video conferences into something productive by encouraging them to complete work together. This has been successful with the students who had already been video conferencing and speaking to their classmates over the phone regularly before school closed. This subset of my class has been able to bring group work to online learning.

Social emotional learning is a primary focus of my school, as is forming strong relationships with students

and families. To meet this important goal during the transition to online learning, supports were implemented on both the school and class levels. On the school level, administration and other faculty have been creating morning announcements for families to watch on YouTube each day. These announcements provide a variety of quick, fun activities, share quotes to think about, and highlight teacher-created videos for students to watch. From the classroom teacher side, each grade level team is expected to create a video a day to share with families. This ends up being one video a week for teachers to create. Through these efforts, students see familiar faces and hear familiar voices.

For my class, I try to support social emotional learning virtually by holding classroom meetings through Zoom. Through this tool, students get to see their classmates and ask questions about work; we can all check in with each other to see how things are going in these uncertain times. Students have also emailed me about events happening at home, using different platforms to continue communicating about life events they would normally share with me in the classroom. I am not sure about the exact number of families from my class that have been economically impacted by this situation, but I know that at least a few families are facing financial difficulties. And so I have been reaching out to families by email, phone, and class dojo to continue to be a support.

A Challenging Transition

This transition has not been easy, and reaching every student in my class has proven to be quite a challenge. Approximately one-third of my class consistently complete their assignments and reach out with questions





when they need help. For the remaining two-thirds of my class, I know that various barriers are preventing them from making instruction a priority. One major barrier in my class is that many of my students are taking care of their younger siblings while their parents are at work. Another barrier is access to technology. In some homes, the school-issued Chromebook is the only computer. The children share this Chromebook in order to interact with their classes in Zoom meetings, complete online work, and watch instructional videos. As a result, some of my students have only limited time on their Chromebooks. After the spring break, the district slowed down the pacing so that Reading and Social Studies are taught two days a week, Math and Science are taught two days a week, and resources are taught one day a week. This eased the instructional burden for families sharing devices, as the students no longer needed to complete assignments in every content area, every day.

Another challenge is that over one-third of my class does not have an adult family member at home who is fluent in English and thus able to help with school assignments. To mitigate this problem, I implement online lessons to teach new content. We now have access to new resources that provide content for science in several different languages, which is helpful for the families with an adult fluent in another language who wants to help with schoolwork.

This still leaves a small population of my class that will need summer remediation or review on 5th-grade content in middle school to receive a fair and equitable

educational experience. These are the students with parents who cannot read and write fluently in any language and the parents without internet who do not return phone calls, text messages, or class dojo messages. For this 5% of my class, I am attempting to make contact and provide support, but unfortunately have had minimal success.

Support for a New Learning Environment

Overall, the transition to online learning has been much easier than expected, thanks to the supports provided by my district. These supports have been providing curriculum, providing professional development on how to utilize both new and old technology resources to help students learn effectively on the new online format, and providing clear expectations at both the school and district levels. While we certainly have faced challenges, the students have responded very positively to Zoom meetings and phone calls home. In my class, the number of students participating in Zoom meetings is usually double the number of students completing work on a given day, so there is certainly some level of engagement with most students.

We are all learning together in a new way during this worldwide crisis.

originally published in the May/June 2020 issue
of *Childhood Education Innovations*.