

2021

Voices for Change: How Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic Clarified What's Important

TEACHER LEADERSHIP FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM AT CCSU
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
THE CONNECTICUT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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Acknowledgments

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Finally, I thank my children, Seth and Sara, and my children’s children – Ezra, Susannah, Cove, Lily and Isaac – who constantly give me reason to dedicate my life’s work to supporting their teachers.

*Dr. Betty J. Sternberg
Director, Teacher Leader Fellowship Program
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Foreword

In the midst of a global pandemic, nine educators from across Connecticut, all participants in Connecticut's Teacher Leader Fellowship Program, sat on an educator panel about teaching during COVID. That discussion led to future conversations, eventually evolving into the nine essays in this monograph. Each author has a unique perspective and voice, but together these educators convey common themes — a rejection of the “old normal” and a commitment to a future that's more equitable and humane.

Together, the nine essays offer a glimpse into just how exhausting and stressful the past year has been on educators. Yet they also reveal how collaborative, resourceful, and innovative educators can be, even in the midst of a global health emergency, especially when provided greater autonomy and support. If the new normal is going to be better than the old, it must be built on what Jennifer Norman calls, “the core principle of trust.” Educators are highly educated professionals, and they should be trusted to make teaching and learning decisions that impact their students.

These essays also convey how worried educators are about their students. “I'm not worried about academics,” writes Anthea Grotton, “I'm worried about my students' safety and their emotional well-being.” These concerns are voiced by the other authors as well, who worry students are increasingly disengaged, about what might be happening at home, or if students are going to bed hungry. The pandemic will exacerbate a pre-existing childhood mental health crisis, and educators must prioritize Social Emotional Learning (SEL), even if it means slowing the pace of instruction or reducing time spent on test preparation. “If the pandemic has taught me anything,” writes Julia Darcy, “it's that we need to rethink education in terms of addressing the needs of the whole student.”

Educators make meaning of the past and create the lessons for the future. These nine authors supported and inspired each other in the search to make meaning out of their individual pandemic teaching experiences, to find a bright side to the hardship and stress of the past year. The essays share an underlying optimism that the future can be better than today, that together we can create an education system which works for all children – one that values their humanity more than their test scores. Jennifer Leniart captures the optimistic spirit of these essays in her conclusion: “The silver lining to this pandemic,” she writes, “is an opportunity for change; an opportunity to keep what works and to change what doesn't. This is an opportunity to trust each other, to trust our educators to rebuild our education system and, most important, to trust our children to build a better world.”

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It isn't the Data

By *Anthea Zizzamia Grotton*

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Our students . . . need their teachers to look at what is genuinely important. It isn't the data or the assessments; it's the students in front of us who so desperately need us to see them, to listen to them, to believe in them.

As an educator of 20 years, I've often found myself wondering, what next? How will I do this? How will I connect with my students as I have in the past?

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators around the world to rethink what we have always done. We all grappled with what this school year would bring, and countless efforts have been made to be in school, be safe and teach in a variety of new models.

I spent most of the spring and summer talking about reimagining education and hoping that at the end of this we will have learned something. As the school year started, I shifted my focus more than I have in the past. What is the most important thing in my classroom, in all classrooms? Our students. They need their teachers to look at what is genuinely important. It isn't the data or the assessments; it's the students in front of us who so desperately need us to see them, to listen to them, to believe in them.

Like many, I'm teaching students remotely and in person. I've spent endless hours trying to figure out how to ensure that they're safe, happy and love school.

There was one student I couldn't stop thinking about. I didn't want him disconnected from school at the age of five; school connectedness and belonging to a school community are keys to emotional well-being and school achievement. I needed to make sure he was engaged and knew how much I care about him. I didn't do anything innovative, or anything teachers everywhere haven't been doing all along. I simply set up a time to meet with him to talk and check in. I'm so grateful I did. I started by asking what he likes about school, and we talked about his favorite things to do (draw pictures of himself, dance, listen to stories). I asked him what he didn't like and told him it was OK to tell me. He couldn't think of anything, but continued to tell me what he likes to do – and that includes writing books. If I hadn't taken the time, I might never have known this. As we talked, he wrote a book about a dinosaur, read it to me and put his name on it, because "that's what authors do."

This student doesn't like writing his name, especially if he thinks I'm checking to make sure it's correct. He would often disengage or break down. But when he was able to add his name to his book, he did so beautifully, and was proud and excited to show me. He loved his book; his work mattered to him.

My fear is that once the pandemic is over and we return to school, we will go back to doing what we used to do. I'm not worried about my students falling behind academically. I see them do amazing things every day. They show me writing they've done on their own and things they've created. They hold up messages to

their computer cameras that read, “You are loved.” They share about their pets, their siblings – things that matter to them – and they all want to take turns reading. One of my students taught a parent in a Google Meet how to pin my face so I was the only one on the screen. The student said, “It will help, it makes it less distracting.” It was incredible to sit back and listen to her teach.

Our students are learning. They’re learning in different ways, but they’re learning academically, and more important, they’re learning the lifelong skills of empathy, flexibility, compassion, and kindness.

Every day I teach directed skills and collect data about my students. Most of that data doesn’t drive my instruction. I learn more about them and what they need through conversations, observations, and speaking with their families. With the emphasis on curriculum, staying on track with the pacing guides, and focusing on data, we lose teachable moments with our students. We lose moments to connect with them. When students are allowed to learn in interesting, exciting ways – ways that matter to them – they love learning.

My students’ work and growth empower me. Knowing they feel loved and valued, even in masks and with distance, emphasizes even more the power and importance of connecting with every student. They have adjusted and adapted to so much in this last year.

Our students need us to look at what is vitally important. What is essential for them to know and be able to do? Now is the time for change. Now is the time to focus on their social and emotional well-being and to fully examine our policies and practices. Let’s end this school year refocused, and start a new one with creative efforts and new educational inventions. It’s a necessity.

Anthea Zizzamia Grotton, Tolland’s 2014-15 Teacher of the Year, has been an elementary educator for 20 years. She received her master’s degree in education in 2001 from St. Joseph’s College and a bachelor’s degree in English from CCSU in 1998. Anthea is enthusiastic to start teaching as an adjunct professor at Saint Joseph’s College. She has been an active member of the Teacher Leader Fellowship Program at CCSU since 2018. She is active in her school Climate Culture Committee as well as her town Ad-Hoc Committee for Diversity and Inclusion. Her diverse family, which consists of many incredible educators, has a huge influence on her work. You can reach Anthea at agrotton@tolland.k12.ct.us

Rebuilding Elementary Education

By Julia Darcy

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Before this pandemic, we were on the verge of losing the essence of elementary education: building a love of learning through socialization, exploration, and fun.

“I can’t wait for things to get back to normal.”

The year 2020 is one teachers would like to forget, and then move on. The promise of vaccines brings us a hope of normalcy. A normal where we can hug our students, huddle like a team on the classroom carpet, and lean in to listen to a student whisper-read during guided reading. We are hopeful to see all the disengaged students back in school where we can do what we do best, connect. But we can’t just go back to normal. We can’t ignore the inequities that plagued 2020. We must use 2020 to develop a normal that redefines elementary education.

Before the shutdown, my classroom was very much structure, structure, structure. I worked hard to develop clear routines and consistent, high expectations, certain that was what’s best for kids. Even after the pandemic, I don’t disagree. But I think there is a beauty in flexibility.

Students in school or virtually are eager to make connections and share. I’ve always made my expectations clear: “Please save your stories for after the lesson!” It’s amazing how fast a simple connection to a story can take the whole class on a creative tangent. But upon reflection, when is the time for stories and connections? If students don’t interrupt my lesson to tell me about their soccer game or their new kitten, when would they get the chance? Where is the time when all the students just get to share and connect? There is no time. Instructional time is too precious.

Performance data drive elementary schedules and dictate more math and more literacy. But what I’ve realized in teaching students virtually is that connections are the backbone of elementary education. Flexibility to go off on tangents can increase student engagement and even be an extension of the learning. Connections show our students that their voices, their stories, are important and valued. We must loosen our data-driven structures to allow students the opportunity to not just listen, but interact and be heard.

Elementary education has become a numbers game of performance. Data-driven instruction, coupled with collective teacher efficacy, is the most powerful instructional pedagogy in education. Data-driven practices close the academic achievement gap. But at what expense? Ask yourself, what do the parenting blogs and social media comments about virtual learning all have in common? Kids miss school, not because they want to learn how to multiply fractions or identify the symbolism of a text. Kids miss school because they miss their teachers, sitting next to their friends at lunch and assemblies, and laughter. Parents miss the chance to hear the clarinets squeak their way through an elementary band concert. If anything, this pandemic has

shown me that while I would love to rush back to “normal” academic structures, we need to rethink education in terms of addressing the needs of the whole student.

We can't be so focused on reading, math and science that we forget there is much more to life and learning. We need to transform education to make room for what kids want, and most important, need the most. An environment where students can thrive not only academically but socially. An environment that fosters a love of learning, piques curiosity, and sparks creativity. There is so much unharnessed power in autonomy and choice. We need to keep time for fun, for impromptu activities. Books should be chosen out of love. Projects should inspire curiosity. Discussions should be nurtured from authentic questions or interest. We can't let standards alone define our learning outcomes. We can't allow students to become percentages that fit into instructional groups. We must remember that our students are kids who have brothers or sisters, enjoy baseball, or love to dance. Before this pandemic, we were on the verge of losing the essence of elementary education: building a love of learning through socialization, exploration, and fun.

In all of these data, are we missing the vital information that can help us create an environment conducive to learning for all students? It was obvious from the start of virtual learning that some students recoiled the instant they saw themselves and heard themselves on camera. Their discomfort on camera is palpable. Their sweet smiles, curious eyes, and the best of all, their wonderful laughs are hidden behind “mute” and “stop video.” The relationships we work so hard to build slip away. But we also see students thrive behind the screen. We see students who are quiet and shy in school take over our virtual classes. Students who were easily overlooked in school became comedians via the chat feature. Who would've thought? Who would've thought that in-person school created the same discomfort for some students that Zoom did for others? Do we rush back to that?

How can we create a chat feature in school? How do we create a learning environment conducive to collaborative learning and independent thought? Should we rethink our modalities for discussion?

One thing is for sure: We need to individualize school environments as we do academic instruction. Are raising your hand, taking your turn and spotlight participation creating a block to participation? We can't force students to conform back to our “normal” school classroom environments. We need to prioritize individualization of classroom environments as we do individualization of reading and math instruction. We need to close the gap, but not just academically.

This pandemic has afforded us the opportunity to rebuild elementary education to foster a love of learning while providing necessary academic pedagogies. We need to make room to allow students to take us on a magical tangent of learning driven by curiosity and imagination. We need to rethink our classroom structures, routines, and expectations to provide an individualized approach to our classroom culture.

Children will never remember a specific lesson you teach, but they will always remember the way they felt in your class – the moments of laughter and the moments of success. Let's give students what they want AND what they need from education. A place where they can feel a part of a community, where their voices are truly heard, where they have fun and where they can thrive. Let's give them a love of learning that not only fosters academic success but will create a bright future of exploration, motivation, and creativity.

Julia Darcy is a 13-year veteran teacher currently teaching fifth grade at Greene-Hills School in Bristol. She received her undergraduate degree in elementary and special education from Manhattan College. Upon graduation, Julia began to take classes in the Reading Specialist Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Concurrently, she began her teaching career at P.S. 109 in the Bronx, New York. Julia received her master's degree in special education from Manhattan College. She taught fifth grade at P.S. 109 for four years before moving back to Connecticut to be closer to her family. She was named Bristol's Teacher of the Year in 2017, and is a member of the Greene-Hills School Leadership Team. She may be reached at juliadarcy@bristolk12.org

We Are Stronger than We Know

By *Sarhanna K. Smith*

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... the pandemic showed us that school can operate differently in ways we never, ever imagined.

When the pandemic hit Connecticut and the decision was made to close schools on March 13, 2020, I didn't have words to describe how shocked and concerned I felt. There were a few days leading up to March 12, our last in-person school day, during which I felt we were all at risk in school of unknowingly spreading the virus. There was very little known about the coronavirus then, and I felt very uncertain about the health and wellbeing of my students, my staff and myself. At that time, none of us were wearing masks. It was a truly scary period.

On March 13, the first day of our school closure, I felt fear more than anything. Fear of the virus, fear of the unknown, and fear of what would happen next, but I also suddenly felt a deep loneliness. All school staff were told to stay home. No students were permitted to come to school. "What is a school without children?" I kept asking. I have always declared to my staff that *the children* are the reason we're here. How did this apply when we had to close our doors to the children? What would happen to our students? We didn't have enough technology to send even a third of our students home with devices needed for remote learning. Little did I know that school would not reopen for the students until the following school year.

Throughout the pandemic, but especially during the time when we were all working from home, I realized my ability to communicate with my staff and students was limited to phone calls, emails or video conferences. Face-to-face interactions that I took for granted were abruptly ended. Suddenly, I felt a sense of urgency to share information. Perhaps it was this persistent fear of the unknown, but also a desire to stay connected with my staff. Communication through email was my primary method of sharing information. I sent emails so frequently that I started labeling them "Update" and including the date ("Update: 3/23/2020," for example). These update emails would often be sent daily, literally at any time I felt my staff needed to know important information, which was subject to change without notice.

And then, something moving started to happen – through sharing information almost daily, the fear started to subside a bit. This sharing of information made me feel closer to my staff. Many would email me to thank me for being so transparent with them. They said that without these update emails, they would have known nothing. I couldn't always answer their questions; nevertheless, there was ongoing dialogue during a very dark time.

Because we didn't have adequate devices to send home with students, we had to make learning packets that were printed out and copied for families to pick up. Teachers and paraeducators were asked to come to school during specific times (to control the number of staff in the building at one time) to help with the printing, stapling and organizing of learning packets. Phone and email blasts went out to families to advertise the times during which they could come to school to sign out the packets. Staff were eager to do their part

to ensure that our students had learning materials to take home. They created learning bags, which included items like journals, pencils, crayons, and glue. We were still scared to leave our homes, but when we got into the building and saw one another, even though from a distance, we felt alive again. Despite the dangers of gathering in large crowds, we could work safely, in smaller groups, for shorter periods of time to help our students.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) rose to the top of our agenda without my having to push it. We had been implementing SEL principles for the past five years throughout all grade levels. But, when our doors closed, my staff realized that it was critically important to help students identify their mood and feelings at the start of each class. Teachers became even more aware of how their students were feeling, knowing that they couldn't see them in person as they were struggling through the pandemic. During virtual staff meetings, teacher leaders shared their remote learning SEL routines with their colleagues, which included, among other things, having students check in on a virtual mood meter (a colorful map that allows students to plot their feelings along a grid).

My administrative team and I quickly implemented this practice with staff and discovered that it had extremely positive benefits. As a group, we expressed our fears, our sense of boredom, loneliness, and cabin fever, but, surprisingly, we also started laughing by connecting with each other through an SEL focus. This focus brought us closer together during a time in which we had to be apart. The teachers started to see that by connecting with their students through SEL, they became closer as a classroom community. Through using an SEL lens, we understood that we needed each other, and it was necessary that my staff and students hear how much they were needed and counted on.

When school opened in September 2020, safety was my biggest priority. I wanted my students and staff to be physically safe and protected from COVID-19. I wanted us to have emotional safety, to feel we were part of a community, no longer isolated and alone in our homes. This would be hard because we are a large school with a large staff and student population. Our schoolwide focus areas became social distancing, hand washing, wearing a mask at all times, and making sure that the mask covered our nose and mouth. Our daily mantra became, "*Read School students and staff follow the 3 Ws: Wear a mask. Wash your hands often. Watch your space between yourself and others.*" And the students surprised us. They all complied! Not one student questioned why they had to do these things. Our students knew and understood the importance of keeping themselves and each other safe. They immediately adopted the language of "social distancing," and they understood how to practice this.

There are important lessons I have learned as a result of the pandemic:

- 1. We are stronger than we know.*
 - 2. The children are stronger than we knew.*
-

During a recent faculty meeting, I asked my staff to share something they learned in 2020 that they plan to carry with them into 2021 and beyond. They shared some remarkable and fundamental observations that ring true for educators anywhere.

Here are a few fundamental revelations from teachers' experiences in 2020:

- 1. I need people more than I thought I did.*
 - 2. Sometimes slowing down the pace reaps greater benefits.*
 - 3. You can figure out how to do many things if you try.*
 - 4. Value each day as a learning experience.*
 - 5. We are essential.*
-

On the first day of 2021, I was at home and came across an interesting thread on Twitter. Matthew Segal, Legal Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Massachusetts, tweeted, “fwiw [For what it’s worth] I think children deserve a ton of credit for how they handled 2020. We asked them to change their lives in numerous, terrible ways, largely for the protection of adults. And they did it... Kids have empathy. And grit.” This tweet touched me and reinforced the lesson, “The children are stronger than we knew.”

Some of the lessons learned over the past year have the potential to benefit current and future generations of students and teachers. In thinking about how we will make school a better place that truly meets the individual needs of students, we must consider how we, the adults, will adapt to being flexible in order to support our students and meet them where they are. Can we maintain flexibility when it comes to grading practices? How will flexibility look when it comes to providing and ensuring behavioral supports? Can we be flexible when it comes to offering varied options for learning? Do all children have to learn while sitting in a classroom? Does school have to look the same for all students? How will we address and provide opportunities for students who thrived during remote learning? How will local, state, and federal policymakers ensure that resources are equitable for all districts, including those of us who represent large urban centers? These are important considerations for educators, boards of education, legislators, and communities to consider in planning for what schools will look like in the very near future.

There is one thing of which I am certain: We are here because of the children, our students. There are students who need an in-person school environment in order to learn and thrive. Students need to socialize and develop friendships with their peers. They need access to technology, both in school and at home, regardless of their zip code. Nevertheless, the pandemic showed us that school can operate differently in ways we never, ever imagined. Let us use some of these lessons to rethink how we do school. We can do this, for we are stronger than we know.

Sarhanna K. Smith is principal of Read School, a PreK-8 school in Bridgeport. She was trained in social and emotional learning through the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, and restorative practices through the International Institute of Restorative Practices. Sarhanna began teaching in 1994 in Washington, D.C. She earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Howard University, her master’s degree in reading from Southern Connecticut State University, and a sixth-year diploma in educational leadership and executive leadership superintendent certificate from the University of Connecticut. She may be reached at ssmith@bridgeportedu.net

Saving Grace

By *Grace Braniff*

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We as public servants have a public servant's heart, and when you teach from the heart, you are contributing to the success of our youth. That's what makes for stronger schools, teachers, students and people who will enter the real world equipped and confident.

I need to change something... I need to change something... I need to change something; I repeat this phrase over and over again as I reflect on my teaching strategies just before my head hits the pillow. I wake up, and immediately I'm forced to think about the "old days." You know, before this. Nostalgia pushes its way into my heart, but my mind floats ideas of what to do to engage my students. How do I get them to greet me "verbally," not just in the chat? I can't even see them; they won't turn on their cameras; how do I get them to like me; how do I get them to laugh at my jokes, which has been my saving grace? They feel so far away from me in this remote learning environment, and I accept that it's going to be a journey to "get to them." With this thought lingering in my mind, I cringe. Whether I'm traveling to the public school building physically into my classroom or gliding down the stairs to my "home office classroom," I cringe.

You may think, "Well, it's not a good sign when a seasoned teacher cringes just before arriving in her classroom." You would be correct. But, that's where the idea of social emotional health comes into play for both students and teachers. While I'm in the midst of grappling with content, presentation, encouragement, inspiration and finding the energy to adapt to create variety every day, my students are grappling with fear, uncertainty, hunger, caring for their younger siblings, finding a quiet place to 'learn' and showing me they care. It's clear that we are all in need of adaptation.

I have always loved being in front of my classroom of students . . . humor, comedy, and making wisecracks about ironic matters of any sort have allowed me to share my true personality with my students. Who doesn't like lighthearted humor to ease the pressure of learning poetry or reading Hamlet? High school students respect when a teacher is true and grounded, and cares. That's me.

I have found that students will participate, put more effort in and even work just a bit harder if you treat them with respect and show (not tell) them you care. I received an email late one night from one of my senior students. She had just recovered from COVID-19 and was attempting to catch up on assignments; I had no expectation of receiving those assignments. The purpose of her email was to apologize for handing in an assignment late – but, as I said, I hadn't expected to receive it at all. I promptly responded with heartfelt gratitude for her communication and dedication. She immediately responded that she didn't want to let me down. I was left in tears.

So, the issue at hand is that I'm currently struggling to find ways to accomplish the same sharing of my true personality with my students who I can't "reach", and this is the cause of my cringing. Don't worry, I'm not afraid of teaching; I'm afraid of failing my students. Thus, the approach to education must change; teacher resources, technology, budgets and our professional development opportunities must also adapt to our ever-changing needs so we can accommodate the needs of our students and the society we live in. Right now, we are behind the eight ball in terms of helping our students with solid social/emotional support.

Sure, I can point out what the problem is and wait for someone else to solve it, but what I've learned is that making a change requires leadership. We will need to start with some of the basics. I suggest we consider the following list.

1. We must begin with our state legislature partnering with the Connecticut State Department of Education to reallocate education funds for technology to, at minimum, be subsidized or negotiate contracts with private companies to offer a variety of online learning sources to all learners. We will need to come together as teacher leaders to be specific about a proposal for each of our school district's needs and to ask for funding to meet those needs. For example, the types of software needed; dedicated distribution and repair processes for Chromebooks; and continued work on mastery-based learning/assessments. Teacher resources need to be available to help us work with families and students to communicate what we're doing, what their children are doing, what we need from them, and what they need from us.
2. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) mandates and funding for curriculum writing to incorporate these into our public schools, and continued support for dynamic adjustment of this curriculum (change is an everlasting concern).
3. Funding for the expert SEL professionals to guide our administrators/educators and our Board of Education members in this important endeavor. Professional development for administrators/educators to adopt Social Emotional Learning into the functionality of the "discipline" process for our students.
4. Increased funding for social workers, school psychologists and other health care professionals to be on site or readily available, and for the ratio of personnel-to-student population to be re-evaluated and improved as needed.
5. Trade schools: Our society is changing and our students want more options than college only. There must be an increase in the number of trade programs and options for students who want to explore other career avenues.

The final topic I would like to bring to the table is the need for an increase in the number of students entering the education career field and educator training programs. We are at an alarmingly low rate of students choosing to enter our profession. This will affect the quality and supply of well-trained individuals, thus increasing the demand. However, the number of teachers we need to help the number of students we have creates a direct relationship. It is a debatable topic because employee benefits take up the biggest bottom line in any district, but I can attest to the quality of student achievement and the work they produce in my classroom when the teacher-to-student ratio is low.

And now, more than ever, our changing society affects student development, so we need more adults helping in and out of the classroom, whether it's virtual or in person. In my experience, when I am co-teaching in any capacity, I am stronger and can reach more students in a shorter period of time. That collaboration is the gateway to re-evaluation and manifests reflection; reflection and adjustment of one's teaching is paramount to career success.

We as public servants have a public servant's heart, and when you teach from the heart, you are contributing to the success of our youth. That's what makes for stronger schools, teachers, students and people who will enter the real world equipped and confident.

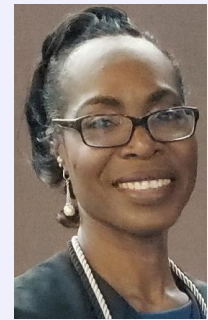
Can our educator training programs evolve with our changing times? Will they? This needs to be re-evaluated because the rookies must continue to promote the strength and fresh outlook the profession needs. SEL must be second nature to these new recruits. The new generation of leaders are the future educators who will carry the torch. Therefore, we must reach out to those educator preparation programs and encourage them to listen to our voice. With a reflection on the changes and adaptations mentioned, I'm sure my cringe will return to my regular smile – which always translates to an inviting and enjoyable day of learning had by all. That is what I will change!

Grace Braniff received her bachelor's degree at SUNY Cortland, majoring in English with a concentration in British and Renaissance literature. In 2002, she received her master's degree in education from the University of Bridgeport. Grace has been teaching secondary education since 2003, and is the co-winner of the 2015 Korzenik Memorial Professional Development Grant from the University of Hartford. She may be reached at braniffg@stratk12.org.

Changing Education Dynamics During COVID

By Nadine Mills, EdD.

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Connecticut Technical Education and Career System



I found solace in the positive and good things that emerged from this unprecedented situation. From this body of dysfunctionality and chaos spawned opportunities for collaboration and innovation, as well as opportunities for those in the shadows to shine more brightly.

Many educators would regard mathematics as one of the most challenging subjects to master, and many individuals struggle to attain proficiency in mathematics concepts and skills. These include high school graduates, with many requiring remediation in higher education. Nevertheless, the impetus of technology in our schools has provided educators with unprecedented opportunities to engage learners in active learning experiences. Such platforms are applied in classroom settings to motivate and inspire deep learning and creative experiences, differentiate instruction, promote equity for all learners, promote collaboration, accentuate individual interest, and potentially address nonproficiency issues in mathematics. Technological methods aid teachers with assessing, instructing, monitoring, modifying, and differentiating instruction to address the diverse needs of students. Nonetheless, many learners at risk of failing high school mathematics continue to experience difficulties in such settings. In addition, COVID-19 created unprecedented educational challenges for leaders, teachers, parents, and students across the nation.

This academic year began with many uncertainties. During our summer break, I was haunted by the numerous changes that would emerge due to COVID-19. Will school begin at the scheduled time? Questions such as these arose:

- Will teaching and learning take place remotely?
- What about the capacity for online access for all participants?
- How do we promote equity for all students?
- How do we encourage research-based practices to best support instruction in these virtual platforms while supporting 21st-century skills for all learners?
- How do educators collaboratively plan for such situations while social distancing?
- How do we best plan for safety and prepare for the unknown?

These thoughts promoted anxious feelings I didn't want to face. I found some respite knowing that our district had implemented an online mathematics learning platform, known as Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces (ALEKS), to help with the instruction and learning in our math classes. The ALEKS program provided opportunities for students to work individually at their own pace and to learn and master topics. Teachers worked as facilitators to provide small group instruction, monitor and track student progress, and employ instructional strategies to support learners' individual needs in person and online. However, the

numerous dramatic changes to our teaching and learning environment left many unknowns and promoted additional anxiety for many administrators, teachers, and students.

Our school year began with the need to organize various instructional models for the ninth-grader cohort of teachers and students. The school implemented instructional models with one-half (or one-third) of the students learning virtually on a given cycle, all students learning online the next, and all students in-person if needed. Such dynamic settings were challenging and overwhelming for classroom preparation and management. The process of identifying virtual and in-person student rosters and groups, learning online instructional programs, and creating learning platforms through Google Suites was no easy task. Accordingly, our teachers banded together to evaluate student data, organize student information, plan classroom management activities, learn and share new online resources, create online classrooms, create and implement instructional plans, and monitor and evaluate learning through the ALEKS platform. Such intensive planning resulted in delays in our curriculum implementation and classroom instruction.

For example, a new mathematical grading policy emerged and required additional time to revamp practices already in place. Teachers were frantically working long hours to keep up with the demands. It was unprecedented. Educators had to learn and teach students simultaneously, promote an effective environment – online or in the classroom – for active learning, employ COVID-19 safety precautions, provide after-school support when needed, address students' technology issues, promote ethical behaviors and fidelity for virtual learning, apply effective assessment tools, apply ways to foster student voice in these new settings, and support parent communication while balancing the dynamic of these new changes. Educators were organizing "extreme chaos" on a scale never seen before.

These new learning environments exacerbated the inequities that continue to plague our educational system and expand the educational gaps in mathematics. Many struggling students became disengaged when learning mathematics independently. Some students stopped attending virtual classes; some would log in for attendance only; while others would be present but disengaged from learning. Several of these issues were due to WiFi and other technical problems, and some were due to students being relegated to home chores, appointments, or babysitting duties during instructional time. I found solace in the positive and good things that emerged from this unprecedented situation. From this body of dysfunctionality and chaos spawned opportunities for collaboration and innovation, as well as opportunities for those in the shadows to shine more brightly.

Opportunity for Collaboration and Innovation

During this period of extreme changes and challenges, teachers banded together to work, create, and share ideas. Cohorts of teachers came together to explore Google Classroom (and other online modalities) like never before. Educators created online classrooms and learned various methods to teach and evaluate content in new ways. These teachers provided professional development training to share their ideas on best practices for the new learning paradigm. Creativity exploded; the administration had provided practitioners with a blank slate to re-create techniques and invent something new.

Some teachers were willing to work long hours to learn new activities and accomplish new tasks and goals. Our cohort of teachers was able to achieve the following:

1. create a virtual classroom (Emojic and Google classrooms) to support math learners;
2. create engaging lesson plans to assist in-classroom and remote instructional delivery;
3. create synchronous and asynchronous instruction and assessment tools for active learning;
4. employ virtual breakout sessions to promote differentiation and collaboration during instruction;

5. reflect computer screens to present content for learning;
6. include diverse learning platforms to engage students in learning math content;
7. collaboratively organize and evaluate data to support instruction and learning and address the needs of students; and
8. share virtual lessons and graphic organizers to assist instruction and learning.

These examples reflect the resolve of our educators and our tenacity to persevere no matter what the challenge.

Opportunity for Individuals from the Shadows to Shine

Not all students were struggling in this setting. The new climate had proven beneficial for some students who were usually classified as shy or withdrawn. These students progressed academically and have opened up to collaborate and participate in classroom discourse. It was as though the virtual platform had provided a stage for these students to express themselves comfortably. They shared their thoughts and ideas in Meet sessions using their microphones, chat boxes, and virtual icons. These students were comfortable in this setting; therefore, they felt free to express themselves and participate in classroom discussions.

What I Have Learned

We live in an era of communication and technology, and COVID-19 has forced educators to revamp the teaching and learning settings for learners. The virtual environment appears to be here to stay, and educators need to find the best form of blended learning practices to maximize the benefits of both in-person and remote learning. Mathematics is only one of the core subject areas that is challenged by these processes. What form of blended learning would work best for learning mathematics? Research indicates that the flipped classroom may work best in this milieu. In such settings, students are provided with information to learn independently and then apply their learning in collaborative performance activities when in-person; teachers facilitate engaging learning applications driven by the creative voices of students; collaboration and individualism are emphasized; various and diverse formative assessment practices are used; and the achievement of students reflects the mastery of targeted benchmarks as opposed to just grades on a test. Now, where do we go from here?

- Teacher education institutions and systems will need to prepare teachers to work in collaborative teams to organize and analyze student data and creatively plan, develop, and share instructional lessons, assessments, and best practices.
- Teacher educational institutions and districts will need to provide additional opportunities for teachers to work in blended learning settings to learn and apply engaging and dynamic virtual and in-person learning experiences to support mathematical instruction.
- Schools and districts will need to prepare instructors to promote student voice and creativity through performance activities to engage learners in authentic learning in the classrooms. These experiences should align with the interests and learning styles of students.

- Schools and districts will need to prepare instructors to promote self-regulation and self-management skills in our younger students to support struggling learners' academic achievement at higher levels.
- Teacher education institutions and systems will need to prepare instructors to enhance learners' ethical practices and apply more diverse formative assessment methods in a mastery model to encourage students to take more risks.

Remote and in-person learning have their benefits and challenges. However, I believe that if we can align blended models to address the needs of our students – and provide engaging learning activities that promote creativity, student voices, and equitable access to reliable resources for instruction and learning – then we will be closer to ensuring that all students can learn and achieve at high levels.

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In 2018, Dr. Mills joined the Connecticut Association of Schools as executive director of the National Honor Society (NHS), where she is the resource person for student leadership and activities to NHS and NJHS members and advisors statewide. She can be reached at Nadine.mills@cttech.org

The New Normal

By Jessica A. Slater

School Counselor
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Newington Public Schools



We have done the impossible this year because we knew that's what our students needed...We must dig deep into ourselves and our "whys"...challenge our value system, take an honest look at how we can grow and improve...It's up to all of us not to resist a new normal, but to define and shape it.

I found myself this past year resisting that statement. No part of education during the pandemic has been normal. I have found myself scrambling to find what "normal" felt like over the past year, trying to find ways to resist a new normal. There have been more days than not that have felt like the first day of my professional career. A novice. There were days I felt empowered and creative, but others when I felt overwhelmed and stagnant. Boundaries have felt blurred. I had this overwhelming responsibility to always be available, and this at times led to burnout. What I loved the most about my role as a school counselor was abruptly taken away. The pandemic threatened the ability to connect with students. The one-on-one connection didn't feel the same behind a screen or behind a mask. The proximity was different. In a year of being challenged, however, I have seen educators shift, adapt and adjust – and despite all the challenges, have seen beautiful moments that make me hopeful for the future of education.

In the past, I think the million-dollar topic in education was time. There never seems to be enough of it, everyone craves it, and we always ask for more of it. This past year I have reflected not on time specifically, but on the efficient use of time. Instructional time is so crucial to getting students what they need, but we also know that is not enough. Students need time for connection, time for support, and time to be creative. How can we fit all of these initiatives into a schedule that doesn't have that time? The difficult and honest truth is, we can't.

This past year has proven, article after article, testimonial after testimonial, that students are struggling. They're disengaging. They feel disconnected. These are the hard truths. However, this is also an opportunity to rethink time to make sure we are setting the conditions for students to engage in meaningful learning opportunities. As we think about our visions of graduates and what we want most for our students, we must commit to using time as leverage and not as a roadblock or an excuse to preserve the old.

Teachers, counselors, and support staff work tirelessly, but often in isolation, supporting and challenging students. How can we be more collaborative with our instructional strategies, using time more efficiently?

We feel pressure to forge ahead, but certain kids continue to fall behind. How can we deepen our understanding of individual learners? How do we permit ourselves to step back in instruction, when needed, to meet students where they are? We have done a lot of that this year; I witness teachers being flexible daily. I also witness guilt, because they put pressure on themselves to do more. This responsibility *feels* impossible, but we can do this! I have seen students who typically fail, thrive during distance learning. I have watched students who thrive in person, collapse. Our charge will require great focus and energy. We need to permit ourselves to take risks. Gone are the days of a one-size-fits-all instructional model. We must have a sense of urgency to create new structures and strategies to meet the complex demands of students, efficiently using the precious time we have.

I know how important it is to build relationships and connections with students. The days I have felt the most empowered are when I've had those moments of authentic connection – just as I did when I used to walk through the building and high-five students; sit down at lunch tables and hear the latest stories; volunteer in lessons with teachers; or watch a student present a project in class. I miss those moments. The rare opportunity I was able to go into a classroom this year, I saw students with masks on in front of computers, not looking up or barely saying three words to me or each other, all while the teacher scrambled to get students to turn on their computers from home just to take attendance. My heart was heavy.

Many times, I struggled to find joy going to work knowing the day would be filled with a flooded inbox, reports of student failures, desperate parents reaching out upset, feeling no control over my day. Feeling I wasn't doing enough when I felt I hadn't stopped. But most important, it felt lonely – for all of us, including students. We were all missing those positive connections.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is that uncomfortable elephant in the room that has lingered at the high school level for years. This year has created urgency in this work. I'm hopeful about what Social Emotional Learning will look like for students in the future. We must commit to making teaching and learning encompass the social-emotional needs of students. The more equipped educators are in understanding these needs, the better students will perform. Students are more than just a letter grade or standardized test score. The self-efficacy of our students depends on our ability to hold them to high expectations. We need them to trust us when we tell them they can.

The foundation is the support and care. We need to better understand our students. We need to step out of the old ways of thinking about what defines a good student. For example, when I missed those connections, I began ending my day with one to three positive phone calls, which were met with gratitude from parents. I was proud to share with families as well as students the accomplishments we were able to discuss.

This year has challenged my creativity because there were many days I was just getting by. Before, I didn't ask for help, but now I know I can't do this job in isolation. This past year has showcased the importance of educators and the value we hold. We have opened up our classrooms to families for the first time every single day. We have done the impossible this year because we knew that's what our students needed. We must take this experience to dig deep into ourselves and our "whys". Challenge our value system, take an honest look at how we can grow and improve. We need to do this with urgency; our students need us.

Making a change doesn't mean what we once did was wrong; making a change is refreshing. Making a change is not doing what's easy, but what is right. We are lucky to be part of such an important time in children's lives. We have the opportunity every day to shape their tomorrow. Now is the time to get students connected, remind them of the powerful tool their education is, and reengage that love of learning. All students have the desire to succeed. Now the task becomes committing to innovation and not being afraid of what school could be. It's up to all of us not to resist a new normal, but to define and shape it.

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The Silver Lining

By Jennifer Leniart

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Building a caring and trusting relationship with students is more important than the subject-specific curriculum being taught.

I used to be content with being a great teacher. I am no longer content. My mindset changed on March 31, 2020, the 13th day of teaching remotely. I realized that amid the fear, chaos and anxiety of the pandemic, there was a silver lining for educators. We have an opportunity to pause, rethink and reform education.

On that day in March, I received a photo of a student's artwork inserted into a Google Doc with an apology from him for turning it in late. My immediate response was to assure him that I was flexible, that everyone works at their own pace, that I was glad he had time to work on the assignment and that his work was great. We ended up having a 30-minute written conversation in that Google Doc which inspired me to make changes in the way I was teaching.

Since then, I've had the opportunity to teach elementary art fully remote, all in person

and a hybrid of both. This has brought on many challenges, but it has also forced me to refine my teaching skills. The most valuable lesson I've learned is that students learn best and are most creative when they are allowed to work at their own individual pace, have a voice in their own learning process and are given regular, individualized feedback based on their growth.

At the beginning of this school year, we were given approval by our district administration not

to strictly follow the pacing guide of our curricula. Instead, we were asked to put our students' Social Emotional Learning (SEL) needs first and to embed SEL activities in our regular routines. As I worked with students, I found myself asking the questions, "What do you need to understand this better?" and "How can you show that you understand this concept?" Although these are questions I've asked students before, the difference now is that their answers drive what I plan next for them.

In the past, the curriculum pacing guide dictated how much time to spend on a topic or skill; now, the students are dictating the pace. The advantage: They are more engaged and motivated to learn, and they take more risks. Why? Because they are receiving the instruction they need and I've prioritized building relationships with them. In my teaching schedule, I teach more than 400 students

a week. Prior to COVID, having that many students made it quite difficult to build relationships with every student.

Working primarily in Google Classroom has allowed my students to document their progress daily in the form of photos and artist statements, which in turn give me the specific information I need to differentiate instruction for them. In the past, feedback was primarily given verbally while students were working in person; now, the majority of my feedback is written and in Google Classroom with the documentation of their work. Even when students are in school with me, I've been providing written feedback to them. I do this so parents who manage their child's work at home are informed of their progress, and students have the feedback when they need it. It also allows them to navigate their learning more independently.

In this school year, with my upper elementary students, I've shifted the main focus of my

lessons from exposure to master artists and exploration of materials and skills to student voice. This shift allows my students to better direct their own learning and to communicate their own personal ideas through their work. The skills and master artists are still embedded, but are there as secondary resources. Instruction has become more individualized and student voice is more prevalent. This change has become reliant on written feedback and dialogue with my students. My biggest question right now is: How do I maintain this level of feedback, student voice and risk taking for years to come? Things can't go back to the way they were.

Several things need to be in place in order to maintain this level of learning:

1. Technology issues need to be addressed. Wifi is no longer an extra frill; it is a necessity that must be affordable for all families so there is a level playing field. Infrastructure needs to be in place to support technology in every home for every student.
2. SEL Building a caring and trusting relationship with students is more important than the subject-specific curriculum being taught. SEL needs to be embedded in every course and in every subject area. Teachers need to be better trained and prepared to handle this.
3. Curricula Curricula should be an overview of skills and concepts to be taught in each course. The pacing guide should not dictate when to move on to the next concept; instead, teachers must be respected and trusted to make the best decisions for their students.
4. Student Voice Student voice is necessary to keep them engaged and motivated to learn. Students need to be challenged to think and problem solve in all areas.
5. Partnership Partnerships among schools, students, and families are a must, and can no longer be on the back burner. I've reached out and talked to and "trained" many parents/guardians in how to use Google Classroom, join Meets, and discuss and model how to encourage their students to think and work like artists. Many, many more families than in a regular school year. As soon as I make the time for them, educate them and show them I care about the success of their children, they are fully invested and engaged in the learning process. Partnerships must start as soon as their children begin kindergarten.

Going forward, the partnerships among school, students and families will be vital. For too long, educators have had the sole responsibility of educating their students. This burden should not land only on the shoulders of the teachers; instead, schools, students and families need to be equally accountable for students' success.

Analyzing the characteristics of the successful students during hybrid and remote learning during the past year, I've come to realize that each student and family must see the importance of education before they are fully engaged and value its importance. The most successful students have themselves, their families and schools on the same page and working as a team to encourage and promote learning and success. Many students who were successful pre-COVID have been successful in remote and hybrid learning; many students who were passive learners before COVID are the ones who have been most difficult to reach during remote/hybrid learning; students who were inconsistent before COVID, continue to be inconsistent; and some students who participated minimally before are flourishing now. We, as educators, need to take this information and use it to continue to improve our educational system. We need to continue to build trust between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, and schools and the community so our students can thrive.

The silver lining to this pandemic is an opportunity for change; an opportunity to keep what works and to change what doesn't. This is an opportunity to trust each other, to trust our educators to rebuild our education system and, most important, to trust our children to build a better world.

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Ready for Restart

By Jennifer Anderson Norman

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I have come to realize that the technological facet of education will have to be an essential part of what's next. We need to focus on using technology to drive curiosity in our students. Technology is a tool designed to satiate the curious and insatiable. It must be used as a tool to promote curiosity and wonderment.

Blink.

Blink.

Blink.

When I close my eyes, I can still feel the moment. Disorienting. Shifting. Ungrounded. Adrift.

When the pandemic arrived last year, I was bewildered. I had been so myopically engrossed in my teaching and learning that when I received the message that our schools would be closed for two weeks – two weeks that turned into many months – I blinked hard. I realized that whatever skills I had seeded and grown during my life, whatever strategies I had, were going to be imperative for the test of endurance before us. I would need to grow my roots of bravery and persist through every obstacle.

Five years ago, I met a remarkable young superintendent. He saw my potential and cultivated my thinking and learning about the practice of education. This inspired me to look deep within and experience an expansive amount of growth as an educator. He helped me heal the doubts of self, the moments of stutter where I lost my voice, and helped me find my strength to embrace what was next. He introduced me to moments in which I could engage in bravery and strengthen my roots.

I've received other gifts, too: I have been inspired again and again on my journey to think, learn, and grow by women who see me, encourage me, and provoke me to action. They have made me their daughter, their sister, and these connections have propelled me further in believing in the worth of my own thoughts and voice. They have reinforced my good qualities, challenged me to improve in my practice, and become, ultimately, brave.

I often think about a Facebook meme I saw that had a picture of a dandelion and a rose. The rose was complaining about its harsh living conditions. It expressed a need for special food, purified water, and constant attention. The dandelion was growing out of a crack in the cement, and with a salty, sassy attitude, asked for nothing. Just obstinately grew out of place. I used to be self-conscious of my dandelionhood, but now I recognize it as a great strength. It is from here that I have come to understand what must be next for education.

Pre-pandemic, I had different fears, and they felt big and strong. Now, I see them as small and weak. I know it's important during the uncertain and the unpredictable, times when we may feel our sense of control shaken, to look toward the things we can control until we feel we have a command of our lives again.

I don't mean to suggest my observations are a panacea for all ills we face, but I would like to think there is a place for this dandelion to crack the cement and push through rigidity of thought when it comes to our educational bodies. It's time to manage some of the things we can and should manage. I dare to hope that my truths can become our shared truths, as our mentors have believed in the truth of each of us, and that together we can do the necessary work of bravely breathing life into our educational bodies.

We need to rethink the ongoing learning educators need to stay relevant and rooted in the needs of our schools. The primary system that needs to be addressed is that of teacher preparation programs: They need to promote an innovative practice with a focus on crafting authentic and enduring practices to benefit the growth of knowledge in our students. Preferably, this should be done under the supervision of a master teacher.

Within the system, the thought patterns and behaviors of an organization need to be informed by the Habits of Mind. When a learning organization agrees on its core values, these values need to operate in fidelity with the thinking and actions of the institution. The Habits of Mind outline 16 habits that are expressed through modeling by using clear and consistent language and habits that play the double role of reinforcing the habits themselves. These include persisting, responding with wonderment and awe, and creating, imagining, and innovating. The added bonus is that the modeling and use of the habits are highly contagious, and they become the infused sense of gratitude that comes when a student is thinking and learning in meaningful, durable, and applicable ways.

Those working within the system need to demonstrate high emotional IQ by recognizing their own capacities. One of the truest tenets of the education profession is that we teach who we are. I have long tried to dodge this one, as it requires constant self-examination that, at its easiest, feels uncomfortable and, at its worst, feels like a never-ending paper cut. When I think about the times I have truly been upset with a student, I am reminded of my mentor. She compassionately challenged me to understand that the frustrations I had were really my own shortcomings in instructional design. She gifted me with the choice to step outside my own ego and examine the space between teacher and student to recognize that the human struggle is one where we need one another and that it is at this intersection, this gentle tension of adult to child, where learning happens.

Teaching and learning provide the safe space to practice the art of innovation through meaning-making and authentic learning tasks. We are born curious, and by design we seek to wonder. We are mechanized and acclimated to the standards that inform our learning too soon and without reason. Technology during the pandemic has challenged educators to explore, design, and drive a curriculum that now more than ever meets individual needs.

The careful, pinpoint accuracy of strong curriculum design hits dead center for so much of my decision making in the physical and virtual classroom. I have come to realize that the technological facet of education will have to be an essential part of what's next. We need to focus on using technology to drive curiosity in our students. Technology is a tool designed to satiate the curious and insatiable. It must be used as a tool to promote curiosity and wonderment.

Systems are necessary, but need to grow and adapt. They should be built as dynamic and flexible – responsive, reflective, and deeply informed by a human-first perspective. This means a move away from the standardized testing that has so long reigned supreme in dictating school success. A system composed of the

organic matter of learning cannot be measured by a dot matrix precision machine. It is antithetical to the nature of the system itself.

We must use our bravery to renew our work by germinating an educational system that is defined by a core value of trust. Teachers need to be able to trust that they have the continued and renewed support of the system's structures – administrators, boards of education, and the public. Teachers, after all, are the primary contacts for delivering the dream and inspiration the system needs to propagate and our students need to flourish.

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A New Path for Education

By *Georgina P. Rivera*

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Bristol Public Schools



When there is no path, we can continue forward with resilience as our companion.

I vividly remember the day I received my administrator degree from Central Connecticut State University. I especially remember the president of the university, Dr. Zulma Toro, reading this poem by Antonio Machado. As she read the lines, I looked up at my mother-in-law, who was in the stands mouthing the words with a smile on her face and orgullo (pride). She was proud that a woman from Puerto Rico was the president of the university, that she was reciting a poem from her own childhood, and that I was graduating. As Dr. Toro read that poem, I never could have imagined that the words would be exactly what I would experience as a brand-new administrator in the middle of COVID-19.

“Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino y nada más;
Caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.”

Wayfarer, only your footprints
are the path, and nothing more;
wayfarer, there is no path,
you make the path as you walk.

Fast forward to March 13, 2020. I remember being at the Bristol Board of Education with my team, preparing to take an entire school system online. The task was daunting, and there was no preparation for this new path and the resilience I would need as a new leader.

When Covid-19 began in the United States, leaders in districts were faced with the seemingly insurmountable task of moving to virtual learning. Every day we would go to work knowing that we were on a path none of us had walked before. Our job was to support leaders, teachers, students and families who had to quickly pivot to a virtual space, and there was no path to follow. Our job: Set one foot in front of the other and make a new path.

Our job: Set one foot in front of the other and make a new path.

All I remember of the beginning was working endless hours with little to no self-care because there was much to do in the early stages. My daily routine consisted of a quick journal entry, tons of work and hopefully getting in a meal and some sleep. I realize now, my first mistake was that I did not put boundaries between work and life; as a result, they all became one. I was not as resilient in the beginning because I was not intentional with my habits. I remember feeling weary and knowing that I had to change my daily routines to adapt to this “new normal.”

The world had shut down so quickly, there was nowhere to go, and the people I normally would spend time with were also quarantined because we did not know how to stay safe from the virus. Resilience at that time was far from my reach, and I knew being connected back with students and teachers would help grow that resilience. As much as I loved my role and team at the Board of Education, my calling was to be in a school caring for the people there and walking the path alongside them.

As I look back on that time, the actions which made the biggest impact related to the human side of teaching and learning and less about my administrative courses. The first important action was setting up a structure for teacher collaboration across the district for K-5 teachers in all subjects. This structure allowed educators to combine their talents and, most important, feel connected. School-based coaches became grade-level mathematics coaches serving the entire district with the goal of bringing teachers together to share ideas and create resources for their virtual classrooms. This new pathway of districtwide support helped make the difficult work a little easier and, most important, gave teachers a safe space to share stories. Some principals asked why I, the district mathematics supervisor, did not lead all those meetings. The clear answer: I trusted my coaches as leaders, and I knew teachers needed a safe space to learn, grow, share and sometimes even weep. The work last March was extremely hard to begin with, and the stress was palpable from everyone. However, as each week passed we grew more resilient.

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In my new position as a campus administrator, it’s important to check in with coworkers each day by bringing a smile to their face with my comedic side or write a note of encouragement. As a leader, it is my responsibility to care for the people I serve, and that caring and pushing out of love is what makes me more resilient. Their stories and struggles have helped me reflect and grow and allowed me to bounce back faster than at the start of the pandemic. Just as teachers deeply care about students, leaders need to care equally for those they serve. What became most clear during this time was that showing I deeply care includes being the best listener I could be. Because we are all on a new path, I know I don’t have all the answers. When I listen and we problem-solve together, we come up with better answers. Other actions of caring I use in my daily practice include offering kind words, sending emails acknowledging teachers’ efforts, and providing a quiet space for teachers to just pause and breathe.

For years, we have wanted to change systems in education, and this always felt impossible. However, with COVID-19, we were able to begin reimagining school in ways that benefited students and families. There have always been inequities; however, the inequities had become more glaring, and could no longer be ignored. For example, school communication was translated for all families, because if it wasn’t, students could not access their tools for learning, health and wellness services, student support services and necessities such as meals. We adapted grading policies to account for some of the circumstances students were experiencing as a result of the pandemic, and we modernized teaching practices to better support students in remote learning environments.

All of these changes required me to bend. This means I had to be flexible and change structures, policies and systems that were not working for students and their families.

Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.

As you walk you make the path,
and as you turn to glance behind
you see the trail that you never
shall return to tread again.

Our school community became more flexible, because it was what students needed. The byproduct was that as a staff, we became more resilient, collaborative, compassionate, and connected. The changes couldn't have occurred without personal stories shared in meetings, breakout rooms and hallways, because all of us were walking a new path. The stories helped us to grow our practice, our relationships and ourselves. Navigating the new path was difficult, and we needed each other. We continue to navigate the daily changes the pandemic throws our way, and we do it together. When there is no path, we continue forward with resilience as our companion. The Teacher Leader Fellowship Program created supportive spaces for stories, and because of these stories, I was never alone on this path.

What is your COVID-19 leadership story? Take some time to remember the lessons of this past year, as you walk forward on your new path in the next season of your life.

Mrs. Rivera is a school administrator for the Bristol Public Schools. Previously, she worked as the district's elementary STEM supervisor, elementary math coach, and middle school math teacher during her 21 years in the district. She has spent much of her career facilitating professional learning for elementary and middle school teachers, coaches, and administrators related to mathematics teaching and learning and leadership. Mrs. Rivera has presented on equitable mathematics teaching practices for NCSM, the Council of State School Officers, NCTM, and Student Achievement Partners. She is co-author of *Math by the Book* and contributing author to the *Reveal Math K-5* and *6-8 Math Series*, and wrote a piece for the *NCSM: Framework for Leadership in Mathematics*. Georgina may be reached at geoginarivera@bristolk12.org

Afterword

Pre-pandemic, all teachers were leaders of the children in their classrooms. They made hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions each day about how to instruct their students effectively and efficiently. However, their decisions were made in the context of a structure determined by others – use of pacing guides; collection of data using predetermined assessments developed by people other than teachers; a laser focus on cognitive skills, almost to the exclusion of a meaningful focus on the social/emotional skills that are necessary foundations to achieving cognitive skills.

During the pandemic, by necessity teachers took the reins and made the leadership decisions to focus on what they saw was most important – attending to all aspects of the health and safety and emotional needs of their students. They broke out of the structures handed to them and reached out more, and more meaningfully, to collaborate with their peers.

Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic Did, Indeed, Clarify What's Important

Post-pandemic, we should never go back to pre-pandemic times when many teachers were required to follow and implement policies and instructional approaches developed and given to them by others who are not regularly involved in the act and art of teaching. Few formal mechanisms were put in place to allow teachers to voice concerns and raise legitimate issues that might require changing the policies and approaches they were required to implement.

Teachers are leaders, and they must be trusted to lead in a constructively collaborative fashion with parents, administrators, policy makers and students themselves to make and implement decisions that are in the best interest of students. If we don't purposely enable teachers to do so, the profession will lose our best and brightest.

Today's new workforce is comprised of people who are seeking to understand and use their agency in their work environments. This has not generally happened in the teaching profession, but did – out of necessity – during the pandemic; it was the silver lining.

Now we must continue this shift toward trust in teachers who are leaders in their own right. Together – leading collaboratively – we will change our world toward a better, more humane one where caring, compassion, empathy, equality, creativity and innovation are not second to academic achievement but are seen and understood as a foundation for – indeed, the very fabric of – achievement in our lives.

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