

7 True Stories From Virtual School - The New York Times

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Teachers, administrators and service providers talk about what remote teaching is really like.

Illustrations by Sam Kerr

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Daena Adams, 36

Principal, Woodlawn Campus High School

University of Chicago Charter School

Interview by Carlo Rotella

Teachers started reporting that students were in class on Zoom while, for example, moving boxes at a warehouse. The norm was that the camera be on, but especially as time went on, the kids often had it pointed at the ceiling. Teachers could tell when kids were at work because it's a higher ceiling than their bedrooms!

We had a student — a top student, a great kid. The kids were in class onscreen, and he was in his car driving to work. He was participating, and then a question was specifically asked to him, and at that moment you could hear metal crunch, and the phone fell off the dashboard. I was observing the class, and my heart dropped. Everyone's mouth just fell open. There's silence, then: "Hello? Are you there? What's going on?" Eventually we were able to get back in touch with him, and he said he'd been rear-ended, and the other driver took off after they hit him. You could tell he was shaken.

I had to call a delivery company and a supermarket chain and say, "Please stop hiring my kids, or at least stop scheduling them during the school day." I asked them to schedule students from 4 p.m. to 12 a.m., because students were also working overnight, getting off at 7 a.m. and falling asleep in class. We can't just tell kids, "Don't do that," because we don't have authority over what they do at night, but it's strongly discouraged.

I spent a lot of one-on-one time with students to try to get them to understand and prioritize themselves. I'd say: "What are your overall goals? If you are interested in going to college or going into a trade, we need to think about how that happens for you. You need to graduate here."

'I had to call a delivery company and a supermarket chain and say, "Please stop hiring my kids, or at least stop scheduling them during the school day." '

With parents, I started by saying: "Look, we understand that the kids are doing a bigger share of earning to keep the lights on. How can we work together so your child can be in school and work?" But I know I made some parents angry. I said to them, "You've got to be the parent." Some understood, and some hung up on me, yelled at me, lied to me or said: "Well, I need her to work. She has to go. What are you going to do, fail her?" I had to say, "If she fails, well, yes."

This summer, we did a lot thinking about how to get ahead of the issue of more kids working. We sent communications about what we expect in terms of

attendance and participation, just making clear that students cannot work at the time when they have to be in school. We also want to provide after-school programs that pay students to do internships and assistantships. And we've built out some lessons during homeroom that talk about time management, making decisions, how you get your schoolwork done if you work after school.

We've made adjustments, but we can only adjust so much. We're in-person every day from 8:30 to 4, and the expectation is that students need to be present for the whole day.

Now that we're back in session, students are definitely still working — the majority of our juniors and seniors have jobs — but they have shifted their hours to after school and cut down their hours. Right now everybody's trying to adjust and live within the expectations; parents, too. But it may become a bigger problem in another month or two, once families realize how much income is missing.



Gallaudet Howard, 54

Teacher, Humanities, Waring School, a private school for grades 6 – 12
Beverly, Mass.

Interview by Bonnie Tsui

When my father began to die, in October 2020, I carried my computer and my 11th- and 12th-grade students on Zoom into his hospice room, and we read “Gilgamesh.” I told my students that my father had dementia, that he’d fractured his hip and that his prognosis was bad — that he’d probably ask the same questions over and over, that monitors would be beeping and that we might have

to end class abruptly if things got worse. I told them what my father, a Shakespeare scholar and writer on religion, had told me, what he'd written books about. That all of it — the ancient text, the washed dish, the emptied bedpan — manifests love and death.

They were a little nervous at first, but they put up heart emojis in their Zoom squares and knocked the discussion out of the park. They could see my father, listening, continually amused and interested because every time he looked away and back, the text and round-table discussion were reassuringly familiar to him. These were our last conversations. I told my students: "Look what you gave him, and me. Thank you."

I watched my students take in the resonance between my father's death and an ancient epic verse about death that asks, "Why did this happen?" but then doesn't provide an answer. It's about breaking your heart and learning to live with the crack. Sharing it with these teenagers, who tend to experience everything intensely — I was very apprehensive for many reasons, but I realized that what I'm really teaching is stories of people's experiences. They're stories of humans in time. Not just because we read them, but because we live them.

If we hadn't been in a pandemic, I wouldn't have been able to bring my students into that hospice room with my dad. I would have kept them separate. But what my father taught me about teaching held up during this pandemic year, and I'm going to keep doing it. He said you have to be passionate about your subject and vulnerable about that passion in order to have any chance of engaging your students. I wouldn't privilege that rawness and vulnerability if I didn't feel that it made them better people. I've been thinking about it a lot, how to invite this rawness and vulnerability into this next year, when I'm teaching U.S. history and literature.

A lot of work we are doing as teachers is to create containers to hold the emotion of the new school year — and of course it's more intense because we also need to hold people's responses to being together again and the losses of last year. To create space for that loss and grief to arise and also for the joy of being able to set foot back on the normal trail.



Joann Vazquez, 60

Tech-support specialist, Beaverton School District
Beaverton, Ore.

Interview by Zipporah Osei

I'm one of 39 school-site techs that serve the district. When Covid started, we knew right away that we would need tech support in Spanish for my schools. We're a majority-minority district. There are 94 languages spoken in our district. Twenty-six percent of our district are families that identify as Hispanic.

I felt like the students and parents in my schools were maybe the least prepared for online learning because there are so many recent immigrants, and the extent of their electronic device use is their cellphone. And here the school district is saying, The way we can do school is if we lend you an iPad or a Chromebook and use these new learning platforms Canvas, Seesaw and Zoom. The first 10 weeks of Covid, I would get asked by teachers to talk with families because kids weren't getting online.

Typically, techs based in schools don't work during the month of July, but very quickly anyone who could speak Spanish was asked to come in and support K-12 virtual summer school. Parents would call and say: "We missed the online session. We can't get on Zoom." Or "I'm trying to get onto Seesaw, but I need the code," and that would mean explaining how to use a different single sign-on app to transfer their information through our servers and connect to their teacher's virtual classrooms. From May 2020 through summer school, that was a dry run, but then everything went full force in September because everyone was expected to be online.

The third person who helped us during the summer last year ended up becoming a teacher and couldn't come back into the tech department. It was just me and another colleague of mine, and we were easily spending six hours a day just on the phones trying to work with parents. We started saying, "You've got to get more people to help us."

I knew people that I thought could help. At that time, the bus drivers for the district were not driving. There were a couple of bus drivers brought into the central I.T. office, who were helping Spanish-speaking families with their technical needs. They brought on two bus drivers and two instructional assistants, so we had to train them.

By the time we got to January, there were a lot less calls on the help desk. Students were showing up and doing the work. When we went into the hybrid model in April this year, all my bilingual help-desk colleagues had to go back to their original jobs. The two bus drivers were hired as tech-support specialists. I'll continue to push to be prepared to serve our bilingual families because, from my experience, we have to speak to families in the language they can be reached.



Patricia Royster, 55

Bus driver, Baltimore City Public Schools

Interview by Erica Green

Most people just think a bus driver can only drive a bus — pull up, open up the door. There's some parents who can't even remember the bus number that their kid got on.

I always knew my job was important. Because you're the first one that kid sees in the morning when he leaves home and the last one in the evening before he gets

home. But when Covid-19 hit, I felt really bad because it was the first time in 30 years I wasn't able to provide service to children in some way, in some form.

Then my boss, the head of the transportation department, asked me to take part in a new program started by the district, a bus tour. We went out in the neighborhoods, gave out school supplies, books, boxes of vegetables. We did laptop exchanges. We gave out information about a lot of things going on that a lot of parents didn't even know existed in Baltimore City.

One day, the organizer of the tour said to me, "One thing I like about you is you don't sit down and just drive a bus." We loaded the bus and unpacked it ourselves.

When I was on that tour, I wanted to leave a great impression. I like to see the kids happy. And if giving them a notebook makes them happy, I wanted to give it to them. Parents were happy, too. We heard a lady say, "I'm ready to go home and make some soup with this box of vegetables."

And I got involved in more of the district's outreach activities. We did a re-engagement for dropouts, who were invited to come back to school. They got like four or five kids back into the 12th grade. It was nice to be a part of that.

I saw the impact all the time, especially the smiles on little people's faces. You ask them sometimes, "What are you planning on doing once you graduate from high school?" And some kids will tell you exactly what they're planning on being, and some kids just say: "I haven't thought that far. But the next time the bus tour comes around, I'm going to be able to tell you."

And they're used to seeing us now. I can be in a market, and a kid will walk up to me and say, "I know you from somewhere." I tell them, "I'm the bus driver for the bus tour." And they say, "Oh, yeah!"



Andrew Mu, 22

Biology teacher, 10th grade, Richmond High School
Richmond, Calif.

Interview by Edwin Rios

Richmond High School is not the best-performing high school ever. A lot of students before the pandemic were struggling, and a lot of students are coming from underprivileged backgrounds. About 90 percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and a ton of the students recently immigrated and may not speak fluent English.

The science-department head at Richmond High School — he's been super great — reached out to me and a fellow Teach For America corps member. We talked about what we might need to think about coming into this year. One of the striking things that he mentioned to us was that online was not working. He likes doing these big experiments that you can do in physics like shooting rockets.

The fact that he said that about 50 percent of kids in Zoom classes last year weren't paying attention or handing in work just stuck out in my mind. I was distraught, to be honest. For my students, that was the first year of high school, and 50 percent of them missed a year of science. One of my students worked full time last year, which is crazy. He told me he only occasionally signed in to class. Even the ones who did show up haven't been exposed to high-school environments.

It's kind of scary to think about where they are right now and whether I have the capabilities to get them up to where they need to be. It's a desperate situation. I'm a new teacher. I don't have experience. Doing the best I can for the kids — I don't know if my best is going to be enough.

It's scary, with the Delta variant. During a recent lunch period, some administrator pulled me aside into my classroom. Oh, God, I am a terrible teacher — that was going through my head. They're like, One of your students tested positive, and you should get tested. I got an antigen test, and it came back negative, but I was still worried. Students emailed me and were like, Hey, my parents won't allow me to come to school because they heard people had Covid. So I have to deal with them online, tailoring stuff I've been doing in class to online.

We did a lab on microscopes at the end of the first week. Students don't have microscopes at home. I had to take some pictures on my phone of images under the microscope. I had to select portions of the worksheet they could do at home.

Doing it virtually is just inherently suboptimal. Honestly, doing it hybrid is even worse. I'm adapting a lesson that I wrote for people who were coming in. There are times I feel very anxious about going to school and feel like, Oh, why hasn't school shut down yet? And then, when I also think about how students have fallen behind from being virtual, I don't know where the calculus is.



Matt Oehlert, 46

Assistant principal, Northglenn Middle School
Northglenn, Colo.

Interview by Rikha Sharma Rani

I had a young woman whom I've still never met. Her family speaks Mandarin. I called probably twice a week. We have a tele-language service here. I can call them, request an interpreter for a specific language and then together we try to call the family. And I was never able to get hold of them. They had a younger

sibling in our system. I finally called over there a few times. "Hey, is the younger sister going to school?" Younger sibling was coming in to school. So then it was a fearful, like, Oh, my gosh, is something really wrong?

We had another kid who chose to go virtual for the year. This is a whole ugly underside of the virtual space: Middle-school boys and girls and whoever were only a few clicks away from pretty inappropriate sites. And though he had been caught by both teachers and parents looking at some pornographic stuff, he couldn't stop. We talked about it and talked about it, and finally we were able to just sort of change things all around and get him into school in person. And then he flourished when he was at school.

We have different wings for the different grade levels. When we switched to hybrid, we had teachers and administrators and counselors welcoming kids at the doors. I got to say hi to every sixth grader that walked in the door. I got to see if they were having a good day or a bad day, or if they got a new haircut or got new shoes.

Self-harm could be an issue. We noticed scars. There was a good number of children who were overwhelmed by what they were feeling, and we were able to see that and pull them in with their counselor. Though being at the door was about temperatures and hand sanitizer, it really became a way to connect with our students. Middle school is at turns absurd — fart jokes and goop — but it's also profound because kids are coming to grips with things.

It's a little different this year than last year. It's kind of back to normal, but also not back to normal. It's been nice doing the greetings at the doors. That boy moved to a different school. I think he'll be just fine. The mystery girl is at school! I haven't really gone out of my way to creepily say: "Hi, I'm so glad you're here. We couldn't find you!" But I look her up online on our attendance system. I also see her in the morning when she walks in. It is just such a nice feeling to know that she's there.



Susan Elswick, 43

Social worker serving Pre-K – 12, Shelby County, Tenn., and surrounding areas

Interview by Elisha Brown

I have three kiddos, 18, 16 and 14. My youngest daughter really needed face-to-face instruction. She really lost something academically by trying to do that virtual platform. Her grades declined. She was really depressed.

The eldest definitely struggled academically to the point where she asked could she please just stop school and get a G.E.D. There was one moment where her

grades were failing across the board. That's when we kind of started realizing she was struggling with some kind of depression.

There was an art piece that she did that almost looked like a portrait of a person. Their eyes were really darked out. The words in the background behind the individual were things like: "I'm not capable, I'm not smart."

When they started struggling, I realized, I'm experiencing what other parents are feeling: The families who are calling in saying that their child used to be a straight-A student, and now they're failing everything. At first I was like, What is happening, what am I doing wrong as a parent? I'm an educator, and I'm a mental-health practitioner, why can't I figure this out for my own children? There's this very fine balance between being a mom and then being a social worker. They need another mental-health professional to work with them, and I just need to be Mom.

I do think that one reason we were able to function during Covid when a lot of people were struggling is that we were already doing telehealth services before the pandemic hit. I have a caseload of about 10 to 15 students that I see a week. Some of those are telehealth, which means I don't have to necessarily physically be on site. I might be assigned to five schools, and I will rotate across those five schools to targeted students.

'I was like, What is happening, what am I doing wrong as a parent? I'm an educator, and I'm a mental-health practitioner, why can't I figure this out for my own children?'

You have to use your therapeutic skills in a little bit different way to engage children in a virtual platform. That probably was the largest learning curve for most mental-health practitioners. One of the very first things we always do when we start a session is, "Do you feel like you're in a safe space?" And we also encourage the kids to wear headsets or headphones if we're having that kind of conversation. But you can definitely tell if the child's hesitant to answer questions.

I was working with a 13-year-old girl. In one session, I could tell she was uncomfortable. I said, "Is there someone else in the room with you?" She kind of looked off to the side, and then I said, "Mom, are you in the room with her?" And the mom jumps in, and she goes, "Hey, Dr. Elswick, yes, I'm so sorry, I just wanted to be in the session to make sure she's being honest and telling you the truth." So I had to stop the session. I went back over the rules and responsibilities for me as a therapist, Mom as a caregiver, the child as a client, and how important confidentiality is, and that I would share things with Mom that Mom would need to know to support her.

It's probably going to take a few months for kids to get reacclimated into the classroom and the routine to feel comfortable. Parents may still be fearful, and so they may not send their children back. We're going to have a higher rate of children struggling with anxiety and depression. Being prepared to answer that call — I think that's probably one of my largest fears.

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