

Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus: A Conversation with a Physics Teacher at a Charter School in Oakland



In this blog series, our Vice President of Programs, Jeff Rozelle, is talking with teachers around the country about their lives during this pandemic. They'll talk about what teaching entails in this new world, how their students are managing, and the unexpected challenges and successes they find. This interview was conducted on April 1, 2020 and has been edited for clarity and length. Click [here](#) to see the other interviews in this series.

Briana Clarke teaches physics at the Envision Academy of Arts and Technology, a charter school in Oakland, California, where she also lives. Briana is 2016 Knowles Teaching Fellow in her fourth year of teaching.

Jeff: Hi Briana, it's good to see you. Are you in your home?

Briana: Yes. I try to go back into school sometimes so that I can have a whiteboard when I am teaching, but then I pretty quickly come on back home.

You use the whiteboard to record your lectures on video?

Yes, that's right. It's one of the perks of living only a mile away from the school. I've got a key, I can let myself in, and it's pretty empty.

Could you tell me what it was like the day or two before schools closed?

On that last day, I wasn't in the classroom and had a sub. I'm not sure if it was for better or for worse, but at least emotionally it was better to be distant from the panic. I was at a meeting for the **Black Teacher Project**, which is a Fellowship that I am a part of. That last day was only a half day. Technicians were coming in at 6 a.m. to pull Google Chromebook carts from all the classrooms and put all the computers in the gym and assign them to students to take home. And I think it's really hard to take on all the panic yourself, and all the emotions that are going on around for everyone else too. However, if I had the chance again, I think I would have liked to have had some type of last statement to students, or at least just starting the conversation about how to stay in touch during this time. I think I was still in a daze of euphoria, imagining having some much needed rest and thinking it was going to be a much more temporary thing than it turned out to be. At the time, it was still very abstract, and it was hard to know all of what was going to actually happen.

What were your students' reactions in the week leading up to closure?

These students are post 9/11 children, as I've heard them called. I think there is a very interesting piece about globalization; everything is close and at the same time far away. My students can see TikTok videos from folks in Nepal and India, but then when it comes to an awareness of what that means and what could happen in the world, I think there is not really much connection. Empathy may not have yet sunk in for students. So I think they were also just glad to have some time away.

What was last week like for you? Can you take me through a typical day?

Lots of computer screen time. Lots of panic and concern from staff at my school, who had lots of unanswered questions. Teachers who had immediate interactions with students were more worried about how students were able to access the material, and still trying to get everyone involved through Google Hangouts. Higher up staff had, I think, a focus on systems and not on students as actual people. Even though they were concerned financially, and rightly so, I don't think that really took into account the social-emotional piece about all of this for students.

So for me, a lot of my week was getting on social media, on Instagram, and just connecting with students one on one. Asking them, "How is your day going? How is your family?" This was outside of physics teaching. I wasn't a physics teacher at that point, I was just an adult figure trying to reach out to a child and make sure they were OK. That was most important to me. Once I was OK, just making sure that my kids were OK also. It was a lot of social-emotional care for students.

In terms of content, I was fortunate to already be in project mode. Students were able to take home their projects that we had been working on and continue to do some hands-on work. I was excited about this because it got them away from their computers for a little bit after being at it all day for their other classes. Students were really awesome in adapting. They sent me videos of their mousetrap cars—they even sent me videos of their cars from their work!

How do you think your students are doing?

I think there is definitely a broad range based on their home life and personality. I think on the one hand, it is really inspiring to see students who are college-ready in not just the academic sense but also in the sense of managing the challenges socially and emotionally. Being able to stay focused in different environments,

being very responsive to teachers. I have had some students who are trying to reach out to peers and help them out, and that is really great to see. So some are really excelling, because they have a sense of purpose and a sense of their goals, and they are continuing to work toward that. For other students, whose environments just don't allow them to focus or students who just don't have the same inherent purpose or sense of where they want to go, I think it has been even more of a struggle to stay on board in terms of academics.

For my students who are going through family trauma even before being out of the classroom, I tried to reach out and have had multiple conversations with some of them. For one student, I'm just sending a daily affirmation, and for another, I'm making a checklist of things that he can do today. For folks that are dealing with anxiety, I'm having just a little check-in conversations throughout the week to keep them on track.

What does planning look like for you right now?

At my school, I'm used to dealing with chronically absent students, which has led me to try to continually develop tools and strategies to get students re-engaged when they are absent for long periods of time. When we were still at school, I used to give my kids a packet every two weeks, and a lot of these packets had links to online videos that they could watch or online labs through [Phet](#). I am still able to use those same tools so that the flow is not necessarily as different as you might expect from my classroom planning.

I just finished up a packet for my students which gives them an overview of the next three weeks with a link to activities everyday that they should be able to do to stay on task. It also has a Google Hangout link so I'm available to give them support if they need help, but it doesn't mandate that they have to be in contact with me. Basically, they turn in the packet once a week so I can see how far they have gotten and hold them accountable. It gives them the flexibility and responsibility to work at their own pace, and at whatever time they think is best for them.

Are there some surprising wins coming out of this?

There are! I recently just came out with this [new book of curriculum](#) for Phet simulations. That book and the individual labs in it are perfect for teachers to use

online and that has been a great thing to see. It's work that I wanted to reach students beyond my classroom, and now I'm actually being able to reach so many more students who have to be online now. People are seeing that need and I'm really excited about this potential. Another colleague of mine just texted me today and said "Hey, we have some more downtime, would you be interested in a second book?" So it's really exciting to be able to plan with more teachers for the future.

The other random win is that I'm now day trading stocks and other things like that to adapt and invest. A lot of people are financially worried, and I'm in a position to take a little bit of money and take some chances on a really low market in the hopes we get back to something close to where we were before and that will pay off. Basically, I would encourage other teachers if there is a project or goal, now is the time to not get bogged down in the present and think about what those future goals are and try to find some time to invest in those.

Are you sleeping well at night?

Half and half. Not having the security or a set plan for the next day all the time doesn't leave you with the best thoughts at night. Being a teacher is all about structure and routine so a lot of unknown gives me unrest, but it goes day by day and it just depends on what I've accomplished and whether I feel productive that day. I'm in a position where I feel like I could do this for the duration, maybe even next year. But God willing we won't do that, because I love interactions with students. But it was a really easy transition because I use a lot of online tools already in my everyday practice. But for other teachers who are not yet there, it's a lot.