

Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus: A Conversation with a 4th-year Math Teacher in New York City Public Schools

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 March 26, 2020 and has been edited for clarity and length. Click [here](#) to see the other interviews in this series.

Ishrat Ahmed teaches 9th-grade math at Leaders High School in South Brooklyn. She's a 4th-year teacher in the New York City School District, lives in Brooklyn and is a 2017 Knowles Teaching Fellow.

Jeff: Hi Ishrat, how are you doing?

Ishrat: I'm good. Just trying to figure out whatever this new routine is.

That's what I'd love to talk about with you.

When this all started, I felt like this is something we have to be cautious about but also, are we going to really stop all life? And I was a little hesitant at first to feel like I needed to stop my life. I wasn't flying to Miami Beach, but I wanted to have my family and friends over to my home.

And then it started to change when it felt like a lot of my friends started to work from home but New York City schools were still open. On the Friday before school ended up closing, we had students who were being pulled out of school all day long. My first period class was completely full-100% attendance. But my students told me, "I only came in because we had an assessment" so they knew they needed to be there and so they came in for that class and then left. By the time I got to the afternoon, I had 6 kids, and I found out parents were pulling their students because kids were telling their parents that "Everyone else is getting picked up and I'm scared." Which was a totally fair way to feel!

I was really nervous about making the opportunity gap for my students so much wider than it already is. We have students who live in the most expensive neighborhood in New York City, even more than Manhattan, and students who I

found out missed a week of school because their mom didn't have a winter coat for them yet. So there are already big disparities, and I worried that these students are going to also have different responsibilities at home regardless of whether we give them all laptops. Are we assessing students? Are we still grading them on this work? Is this just supplemental? What happens when they return to school?

How are your students doing? Are they interacting a lot with you and each other?

I am working with 9th-graders who depend so much on school for their social interaction, for a lot of resources—just the comfort of something consistent. The first week we weren't posting assignments officially, but I posted one just so it was available ahead of time. So many students just started doing the work! I advise 15 students, and we had a video chat to check in and they were so excited to get work because they had nothing to do apparently! In that same advisory meeting, we had a senior who was videoing in with us because she serves as their mentor. She told us all, "No, this is great. I'm staying at home, working on my skincare, living and thriving here." This was a student who struggled with attendance. And meanwhile the freshmen are like where are my friends? I want to see my teachers!

With my advisory, we have a group chat that we all use that they have been using to check in with each other. Mostly things like, "Have you done this assignment? Does anyone know what this schedule is?" I video with that whole group once a week. We even had a Netflix movie party together earlier this week. For the students in my math classes, we have one-hour office hours every day when teachers are available for some face-to-face time. I have a Google Hangout schedule where students can open up the link and drop in at any time.

Are your students dropping in to these hangouts? Are students keeping in touch?

The first day I had about 40 of my 95 students at some point in the day made contact either through the office hour or leaving questions for me to answer in Google Classroom, so that was pretty great.

Even when we are meeting in person, there can be a struggle with this idea that your advisor is someone you go to for social-emotional things and then you have

your content teachers. But it feels so unnatural to just pop into a Hangout with everything that is going on and say “Hey, what questions do you have about the math homework?” And not start with “Are you ok right now?”

I am really seeing a lot of students thrive right now. I was talking to a parent and she was like “(My daughter) wants a job in tech where she doesn’t have to talk to people.” Our school is very big on collaborative learning and very rarely do students have independent work for long periods of time. I have a student right now who told me, “This is awesome. I don’t have to talk to anyone. You aren’t going to make me do group norms. This is great.” But then I also have students who are frequently having video chats together because that is how they are holding themselves accountable to do their work. During one of my office hours, I was giving students feedback on their papers, and I had five students in the hangout and they were just talking to each other. I was like “Umm, I’m here too if you have any questions.” “No, we’re fine-she answered it.” And I was like “OK?” It was great.

I’m seeing students as assets in different ways now. I have a student who anytime I said anything in class, she’d have a response to it (laughs). So I thought, “OK, this is going to be exhausting.” But I had posted the wrong office hours and she emailed four times with “You posted the wrong time.” I told her, I really appreciate that you are on top of this because clearly I am not. In those office hours, which she has attended every single day, a student who hadn’t ever come asked, “How do I even start this assignment?” And as I go to type my spiel that my fingers are used to typing, she says it all, lays it all out there. And I’m like “Do you want to be a TA, because this is great?”

What did yesterday look like for you?

From 9 to 10, all of the 9th-grade teachers met. My principal asked all departments and all grade teams to have meetings that he would also be able to join. Yesterday was the first grade team meeting that I had where he joined us. We tried to keep our regular routines of starting the meeting with a highlight from a student this week, but we had all these audio issues and some teachers have children running around their homes (laughs)-so that was a funny adjustment. We have a really nice attendance tracking sheet and so any time any teacher makes contact or gets a submission we log it and to see what students haven’t been in contact at all.

From 10 to 12, I was just grading and giving feedback on student papers and the assignment I have due on Friday. I was furiously going through those. I'm trying to be really intentional to not do things after 5. I've already gotten a lot of students doing work at midnight and sending me Google Hangout questions. It's hard because part of me wants to respond so I don't forget but I also don't want to open up the idea that now you can talk to me whenever you need. I think if a student is really frustrated or I can tell that not answering this question right now is going to be a big deal, then I will. But otherwise, I think I pride myself on setting up that boundary.

As a school, we're a group of teachers that really prides itself on putting everything we can into our practice. We were recently meeting as a union, and we talked about the need to remind ourselves to ease off the pressure for everything to be picture perfect, because no one knows what that looks like, especially as it will vary from student to student. While also recognizing that as our students are living through and processing a pandemic, we are as well. Right now, I'm taking my best to be giving students what they need which might not be about math.

I probably was grading until 4. Yesterday was cold so I didn't go for a walk, but I am trying to go for a sunshine walk every day to get some Vitamin D. I've been doing a 30-day yoga challenge and so I've been doing yoga everyday. I had virtual therapy which was really interesting. I was going to just do a phone call, but my therapist asked, "Do you need some face to face time?" And I figured I should just take it because I was going to start talking to this plant otherwise. That was nice especially because as someone who identifies generally as being extroverted, now having all of this time at home and to myself is really interesting. And then last night, I had a virtual movie date which was fun!.

What's your set-up like? Where are you doing your work?

I just moved into this apartment, technically a two bedroom but is like a New York City fake two bedroom. I sit at the kitchen island, so I am facing my kitchen and behind me what people can see is a dining room space with a tree and a bookcase. I've tried to mix up where I'm sitting for entertainment purposes but usually because I have the chair here, this is where I work. I have to be careful, especially with my students, because if I move my computer (slowly scanning), my bar cart comes into frame. So I will talk to students here, but I have to be really careful (laughs).

How long are you prepared to do this?

(Sigh) I think my school is trying to be optimistic—"April 20th we'll be back." I think we aren't going to be back. Prepared is a weird word, because am I ever really prepared for this? I think the next unit I have planned is an independent Exeter style problem set where students will be presenting work. I have 60 problems and the plan was for students to try to present. I'm trying to figure out how I can have students record themselves and submit them for a forum. That should take about another 3 weeks, and so right now I am planned out for a month. I know it is for the rest of the year. I don't think I'm going back to school this year. And so it is going to take some collaboration to figure out what that looks like.

I think it is really weird too because we have a spring break coming up. Is it going to be that we don't talk to students for that week and a half? And everyone has to remember to come back online? I don't know. I believe it is important to get that break, but I also think my students might just need more. When all this started, at first I thought why do we have to do school at all? We should just not do anything—this doesn't feel like a priority. But I get the idea now of providing students with something consistent in their lives.

This has been great. Thank you, Ishrat. Are you doing ok?

Yeah. It's been weird. I can't imagine what this looks like for a month yet alone more.