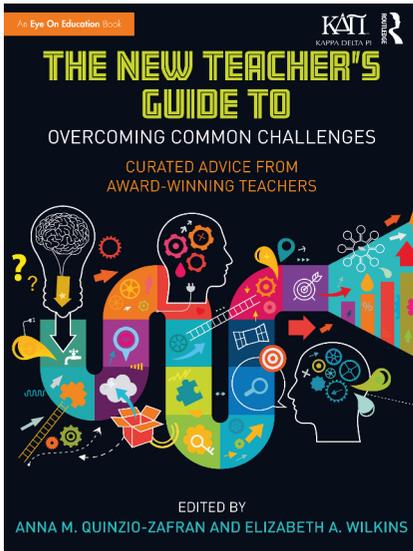


# Teaching During a Pandemic



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from *New Teacher's Guide to Overcoming Common Challenges* edited By Anna M. Quinzio-Zafran, Elizabeth A. Wilkins

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# Teaching During a Pandemic

## Cultivating Resiliency in Times of Crisis

Tonia Holmes-Sutton, EdD, NBCT

*Nevada State Director for Teach Plus*

*NBPTS Board Director*

Twitter: [@tholmessutton](https://twitter.com/tholmessutton)

LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/toniaholmessutton](https://www.linkedin.com/in/toniaholmessutton)

It wasn't long after Governor Sisolak issued a Declaration of Emergency in the State of Nevada that the closure of all public, charter, and private schools was announced. It was Sunday, March 15, 2020. Nevadan teachers posted on social media about the school closures, wondering and worried about how they would lead and serve students and families in a crisis that the World Health Organization had declared a global pandemic. Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was anticipated to be the worst pandemic virus since 1918, when an H1N1 virus infected nearly 500 million people worldwide.

As teachers networked and collaborated with one another to ensure that the needs of their students were met, they discovered that the systemic inequities that were ever present in the teaching and learning communities of the state's urban and rural districts were now exponentially magnified. Unable to return to the schools that served as safe havens to hundreds of thousands of students throughout the state, teachers learned that children and families weren't necessarily sheltered, *safely*, at home. With the closure of the schools came the closure of Nevada's casinos and all nonessential businesses – and the immediate loss of nearly 300,000 jobs, many of which employed students' families. Contending with incredible financial losses to their households, families were anxious about food insecurity and shelter, while also being concerned about becoming teaching partners to their children's teachers. Teacher leaders readied themselves to meet the unanticipated needs of students and families and orchestrated integrated community supports to provide essential resources to the state's 425,000 students.

Southern Nevada, home to nearly 75 percent of Nevada’s residents, found teachers initiating community resource pages on social media to provide and deliver food to students and families that weren’t near the school district’s food distribution locations. Teacher leaders, some of whom served as Fellows in the Teach Plus Nevada Teaching Policy Fellowship, formed coalitions with families and community partners in successful advocacy for additional locations for food distribution in communities of high need. They also designed professional learning communities within and across school sites and grade levels to address the expectations of remote learning, lesson planning, and networking as well as to problem solve the challenges of student engagement. They also offered social-emotional support to one another in the most uncertain and stressful times of their teaching careers. Partnering with family members, who prior to COVID-19 may have entrusted academic responsibility to the schools, teachers held family meetings and one-on-one sessions with family members, via video platforms and cell phones, to help them become more adept at supporting their children’s learning at home. Fueled by purposes and passions that had led them to education as a career, teacher leaders forged collegial relationships across state lines and engaged in national professional learning opportunities provided by leading education organizations, national and international educational coaches, and teaching colleagues with expertise in diverse content areas. They discovered that they were far more resilient than they had ever imagined they could be in the face of such adversity. And while caring for the needs of their own families, as well as that of their students, they engaged in systems advocacy and held policy discussions with members of the State Board of Education and the State and Deputy Superintendents of Public Instruction to reconceptualize teaching and learning in the digital divide.

Empowered by one another’s courageous leadership and grace, they embraced leadership roles not officially assigned to them, and they designed and redesigned teaching and learning spaces that reimaged professional responsibility, professional learning, and professional designations. Teachers became the leaders that they desperately needed to address persistent challenges of equity and access with regard to technology, Internet, and learning opportunities, as well as to attend to students’ physical, mental, and social-emotional well-being. They navigated social distancing to assist families in managing the stress and anxiety of students struggling to understand the rapidly changing circumstances of their daily lives. They “adopted” high school seniors whose hopes for proms, senior trips, and graduation ceremonies had been dashed. They led and served with a commitment to compassion.

Teachers recognized that the resiliency they’d cultivated during these unprecedented times would not return them to a “normal” they’d known, but it would prepare them for a newly constructed reality that demanded that educational equity and access be afforded to all students regardless of their status or station in society.

The pandemic has created many uncertainties and challenges. This may be our new “normal” for a while. As a new teacher, your commitment to working with students and families to meet their needs has never been more important. Be willing to reach out for support. Collaborate with colleagues. Look for ways to problem solve to address inequities and embrace opportunities to cultivate resiliency.

## Remote Learning: Dismantle the World and Re-Create It

Clint Whitten

*Seventh Grade English Teacher/Blacksburg Middle School*

*Montgomery County Public Schools, VA*

Twitter: [@TeacherWhitten](https://twitter.com/TeacherWhitten)

Remote teaching paired with a pandemic allows us to change the systemic problems in education. As Shirley Chisholm writes, “You don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas.” Advice is ever-changing. However, the wisdom in listening to what you and your students need is never changing.

This is our chance to refresh what the root of education means, and to me, that is discovery. What can we discover about the world, ourselves, and about relationships during this new era of remote learning? Allow yourself to create an online curriculum with students’ voices being the heart. What policies will you create together? We have the opportunity to think about what the system of education looks like if we redefine it.

During Emergency Remote Teaching, policies and structures change constantly. It is our job to be flexible, understanding, and vulnerable. Remember that human beings are behind both sides of remote learning. My Google classroom is now a place for television show suggestions, daily quotes, tips on how to build planes, and so on...all driven by students. I host weekly Zoom meetings because students need to see their teacher. I respond to student emails as soon as possible. We have to accept vulnerability and relationships now more than ever in education.

Remote learning is exhausting. Rely on your colleagues and share resources. I have simple goals for my students: Read and write about whatever they can access. Simple goals allow clear learning objectives. Remote learning exposes even greater equity issues. This type of learning disproportionately affects low-income families, particularly Black and Brown students. Therefore, you must provide tools specifically for those families. All students do not have the Internet, caregivers helping them work, or basic human needs. A paper packet will not help these students learn. Give them a book, a project (including the materials), or an independent study. Trust that you know your students.

This is not an academic crisis. This is a world health pandemic. Understand you and your students are human, and the concept of any remote learning must be student driven. Create a world wherein students are not given tests but are given chances to genuinely understand and explore the world.

## But First ... Relationships

Shannon Rice

*Special Education Teacher*

*Jefferson Central School District, Jefferson, NY*

*Twitter: @SRice498*

When I began my journey into teaching, I never imagined that I would be trading YouTube videos of goats wearing pajamas with students to make them laugh. Teaching remotely due to a global pandemic has changed everything. I have decided to focus on what is most important: Relationships with my students.

As I made the shift to emergency learning, questions about standards, curriculum, and workload mounted. The way I prioritized was to focus on my students first. I have had to find new ways to communicate with my students and families on a daily basis. Emailing, phone calls, posting to online platforms, and sending greeting cards through the mail have all become regular practice. The social and emotional health of students is my priority. Teachers should identify what their priorities are, and focus on those elements first.

I check with every student regularly to see how they are doing. Do they need anything? How are they spending their time? Are they getting fresh air? What about managing emotions? These questions are much more important than reducing fractions, balancing chemical equations, or spelling words with the “-tch” pattern. I trade opinions about movies and TV shows. I ask about pets, siblings, and hobbies. Sometimes I just listen. I make sure my students know that I am still here for them, and that I care. Teachers need to ask questions, listen, and be “real” with their students.

My students know I’m not upset if they don’t complete an assignment. I’m not mad that they email me at 10:00 pm instead of 10:00 am. I’m just happy they are communicating with me. Fostering relationships with students will pay greater dividends than any instructional technology or remote learning tool in our arsenal. These relationships will allow me to help my students emerge from this extraordinary experience and continue to grow as amazing young people. I’m putting relationships first.

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## A Shift in Our Perspective

Julie Padilla

*Social Studies Teacher and Literacy Specialist*

*John V. Lindsay Wildcat Academy Charter School, Bronx, NY*

[www.linkedin.com/in/padilla-j-julie](http://www.linkedin.com/in/padilla-j-julie)

While COVID-19 has caused us to experience a world of difference in our personal lives, we are also grappling with a shift in our own professional approaches. As educators, we are

used to helping our students in person, giving them that smile that reassures them, and just being there for them. We need to take these same skills and translate them into support that can be felt through remote learning.

Teachers, we need to do away with whatever assumptions we have. Some of our students are coming from diverse backgrounds. The way our students are encountering the realities of this pandemic may be entirely different from what we know as individuals. We need to be continuously conscious of this. We also need to be realistic about our students and the goals we set for them. With this information, we can do our very best to provide that positive reinforcement they need. Letting our students know it is okay if they are having trouble, to continue to ask questions and make mistakes is essential. What we can do as their support system is what comes naturally to us as educators. We need to applaud our students' successes. We need to continue to acknowledge students for their growth. We need to celebrate our students and allow them to enjoy their time learning. Most importantly, at the end of the day we need to remember they are kids trying to navigate this world the best they can.

While these are tasks we are used to doing in the classroom, it can easily become something we forget while teaching remotely. Keeping these ideas at the forefront in our daily approach is vital and allows for remote learning to occur successfully.

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## Less Is More

Jennifer Jaros, NBCT

*EL Teacher at Holmes and Hatch Schools*

*District 97, Oak Park, IL*

*Twitter: @JarosEsl*

Unless remote learning is a part of the regular school curriculum, it will be used during less than ideal times. Remember: *Less is more*. I do not mean lowering expectations or quality of instruction, but the quantity of work needs to be differentiated. Social-emotional needs must be met before addressing academic learning. Even though I cannot physically share the same space and breathe the same air, I am still connected to my students and must nurture those bonds. This relationship may look and feel drastically different, but I am still their teacher and they are my beloved students.

As students are literally learning from home, the home life of each student must be considered. From the availability of technology, Internet, and basic supplies to parental supervision, physical/emotional safety, and parents' ability to assist with work due to work schedules, caretaking responsibilities, and language proficiency all play roles in the reality of remote learning for each student. I made parents aware of resources available through my district, including technology and Internet. In addition, I shared information on food and financial resources from the district as well as the larger community.

### **What I wish I had known at the beginning of remote learning:**

- ◆ Remind parents that their best is more than enough.
- ◆ Collaborate with grade level, specials, and all resource/support teachers.

- ◆ Use virtual lessons as a way to teach academics and connect socially. This is healthy for both teachers and students.
- ◆ Remote teaching is not simply teaching through technology; it is a novel way of teaching, learning, and connecting.
- ◆ Grant yourself grace and space as you learn the new craft of remote teaching!

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## Delivering Quality Remote Instruction

David Perrin, EdD

*Assistant Principal and Instructional Coach*

*Rochelle Township High School, Rochelle, IL*

Twitter: [@DavePerrin4](https://twitter.com/DavePerrin4)

Like educators nearly everywhere, my colleagues and I have seen our instruction impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and concomitant shift to remote learning. For new teachers, remote learning mirrors many of the challenges they already face. In my experience, the teachers, both new and veteran, who thrive during remote learning engage in three behaviors that allow them to continue to deliver quality instruction.

Successful remote learning teachers maintain and continue to build relationships with both students and colleagues. Teaching is a social activity, and the most impactful teachers are often the ones who work to understand their students' personal needs and interests. Remote learning makes relationship building more difficult, but it's important for teachers to find ways to connect personally with students during video chats, email, or other means. It's also important to provide a medium for students to interact with one another. Encouraging student engagement during remote learning can be a real challenge and building and maintaining strong relationships with students will help them feel invested and accountable.

They uphold standards but adjust expectations to provide grace and flexibility in how students demonstrate mastery. Remote learning exacerbates financial and social inequities, and it is vital to differentiate instruction and prepare materials for students both with and without technology. Remote learning also restricts curriculum. Teachers cannot possibly replicate every classroom experience for remote learning, so it is important to prioritize learning over compliance, minimize and create flexible assignments and due dates, and focus most on the standards that will promote students' success at their next level of education.

They embrace professional development and share liberally. Teachers who already utilized technology and elements of online learning or a flipped classroom are advantaged during a period of remote learning, and their students also experience a more seamless shift. Out of necessity during the pandemic, many other teachers experimented

with new methods and technologies that may continue to prove valuable upon return to a traditional classroom environment. My district has used a district-wide “Teacher Resources” Google Classroom for several years, and during this period of remote learning it quickly became a clearing house for teachers to share e-learning instructional ideas with one another.

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## Tailor Your Remote Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs

Sara Curran, EdD, NBCT

*Fourth Grade Teacher*

*Community Unit School District 308, Oswego, IL*

As I reflect on this unprecedented experience of remote learning, the most essential piece of advice I can give is to know your audience. To be successful, I have to be cognizant of students’ home situations, amount of parental support, access to technology, achievement levels, and social–emotional needs. Promoting student reflection pieces, administering student surveys, and keeping detailed academic records are extremely important to address my students’ needs in this remote environment. I would recommend collecting these pieces of student data promptly to provide beneficial communication and assignments for each student as well as to differentiate learning effectively. Flexibility and a student-centered approach are key!

When structuring curricula and assignments, I have also found it imperative to collaborate with my colleagues. Together, we have been able to provide students with varied experiences, accommodate for students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and develop enrichment opportunities. We have also been able to combine ideas and assist each other with sifting through the barrage of available resources. We have considered various learning styles by incorporating video tutorials, differentiated levels of text, online games, read alouds of stories, and creative activities. If planning with colleagues is not possible, I would recommend joining social media groups with teachers of similar subjects. Ask for help! We are all in this together!

The lack of in-person contact makes it challenging to motivate and connect with students during remote learning. Hosting class meetings for younger students and small-group discussions for older students supports their social–emotional well-being and encourages valuable interactions in the remote learning environment. In addition, providing enticing reading topics, choices in activities, clear expectations, and constant feedback are vital to student motivation and academic success. I look for ways to connect with individual students whenever possible. A few simple words can go a long way!

Although remote learning definitely presents a new challenge, remember: We can do this!

## Four Principles to Guide Remote Learning

Dr. David Carroll, NBCT

*Maplebrook Elementary School/Madison Jr. High School*

*Naperville Community Unit School District 203, Naperville, IL*

When faced with uncertainty in the spring of 2020, our school fell back on several tried-and-true principles to help us meet our students' needs. First, never assume that you know a student's motivation for learning. We found that many students did not have Internet access, their parents were working from home, or their siblings were sharing the same electronic resources. These factors prevented many students from participating fully in remote learning, though we falsely assumed they were uninterested in learning.

Second, communication is key. We found that many teachers were unknowingly scheduling overlapping meetings. Also, some teachers were contacting parents to report student nonengagement, while IEP case managers were recommending that students purposefully limit their remote work to only reading and math. Without communication, many teachers were wasting time tracking down students unnecessarily. In response, we established a shared document to communicate learning modifications and meeting schedules to all staff members.

Third, embrace differentiated learning. I used a variety of activities and assessment methods prior to remote learning, including experiential, interactive, and online-based activities. I had already established a routine of submitting electronic assignments each week, so students easily continued their online assignments as before.

Fourth, use your tools appropriately. Group meetings (like Zoom) should never be used as a lecture tool. Instead, they are an opportunity for students to interact and contribute. Formative games like Quizlet and Kahoot are great for recalling information, while PearDeck and FlipGrid allow for deeper analysis. Used properly, students can remain engaged, have fun, and continue their learning while at home.

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## Our Best Is Enough

Ms. Leana Malinowsky

*Elementary Educator/Reading Specialist*

*Pvt. Nicholas Minue School, Carteret Public Schools, Carteret, NJ*

Even with 12 years of teaching, making the shift to remote instruction has been one of the most challenging transitions I've experienced. The advice I would give to new teachers is the same advice I've been practicing. It's fine to feel upset or frustrated. Allowing myself

the time to acknowledge my feelings provides me with energy to be my best when I teach each day.

I've also promised myself that I would take this situation as an opportunity to learn about various programs and platforms to help implement online instruction. Personally, exploring these areas would otherwise not have been on my "to-do" list; however, I am learning more than I ever expected with ideas to incorporate when returning to in-person learning. New teachers should also view this as an opportunity to explore new options, strategies, and ways to connect with students.

Differentiation, already important in my practice, has become even more critical. This unprecedented time has required me to reevaluate what instructional delivery looks like. I take each student's individual circumstances at home into consideration. I communicate with families frequently throughout the day what they need from me to be successful. New teachers should embrace their knowledge of technology and creativity while considering the needs of individual students and including personal experiences whenever possible.

I continue to explore ways I can teach students so that they relate to the material and feel a connection to the instruction while accessing topics I show them daily. Having to think outside the box for keeping learning authentically relevant through this experience has made me a stronger teacher and reminds me that students learn and grow more when content is meaningful to them. New teachers should embrace these opportunities to connect with students to grow as educators and become confident they are doing their best, and their best is enough.

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## What We Learned From the COVID-19 School Closings

Susan "Ernie" Rambo, PhD, NBCT

*Programs Coordinator*

*Nevada National Board Professional Learning Institute, Las Vegas, NV*

*Linked In: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susanmrambo/>*

*Facebook: Ernie Rambo*

*Twitter: @RamboTeacher*

*Instagram: ramboteacher*

*Websites:*

*<http://www.nationalboardinstitute.com>*

*<http://www.ramboteacher.com/>*

*<https://www.ecet2sw.com/>*

Teachers in Las Vegas, Nevada, learned of their schools shutting down to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the last minute, with no time to prepare students or to determine which students had technology or Internet access. There was no time for making pedagogical shifts,

establishing Zoom accounts, or setting up Google classrooms. On a Sunday night, while preparing for the next week's lessons, teachers learned that all schools would be closed starting Monday and were informed to not engage in teaching or contacting their students until directed by their schools.

On the first day of closure, teachers created and joined virtual professional learning networks to share what they were learning about the shutdown. When could they start teaching? When would they see their students' faces again? Where could they see the packets that were being distributed to students? Was adequate food being handed out? How would teachers connect with their students? How would teachers connect with students lacking Internet access or without adequate experiences with technology to learn in an online environment? The immediate actions of the teachers, directed by the school district to wait for instructions rather than devise methods for remote instruction, demonstrated how educators are qualified and resourceful in finding ways to meet the needs of their students.

Three lessons we learned from the COVID-19 school closures:

- ◆ Developing strong connections with students and families provides a stronger foundation for adapting to unexpected situations.
- ◆ Teachers can and should determine their professional learning pathways.
- ◆ Teachers play a pivotal role in educating the community on how to address inequities that impact student learning.

Connections with students and their families help teachers determine the directions to take in planning instruction, assessing, and reflecting on student learning. Early in the school year, many teachers created multiple methods of communicating with their students' families. Families felt comfortable using these methods to communicate with teachers. Establishing and sustaining two-way communication with students and their families at the start of the school year created an environment of trust and teamwork that supported learning through the school closure.

Well-intended decisions by the local school board and district superintendent for providing remote instruction placed many educators in a space where professional learning was needed immediately and immensely. Teachers utilized the flexibility of time found in remote teaching by attending free webinars hosted by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the Center for Teaching Quality, and the American Institutes for Research. Virtual panel discussions, Zoom meetings, Twitter chats, and Facebook groups, created by teachers, provided spaces for sharing remote teaching strategies and encouragement. For many teachers, this was the first time they chose professional learning engagements outside of what had been provided by their schools. Teachers need not limit their learning to what their school or district provides. What teachers learned during the COVID-19 school closures is that they can (and should) direct their professional learning based on an analysis of students' and teacher's needs.

Inequities in education access were magnified upon school closure. Students in affluent sections of the school district adapted to family learning environments more smoothly than students who depended on public libraries (also closed during this time) or fast food restaurants (such as McDonald's) for Internet access. Enrichment packets created by the school district were distributed at several locations throughout the county and were also available online, yet not all parents had transportation to reach the distribution centers. Families with the fewest technology assets were more likely to have to work outside of the home during

the time that packets and food were distributed and could not supervise their children's learning during regular school hours. Teachers advocated for their students' needs by speaking out through media outlets and speaking up to the school board. Inequities can be misunderstood and go unnoticed by those who are not part of the education system. It is not enough for a teacher to teach effectively. Teachers need to address education policies and practices as part of their work. When they speak, it is not only to criticize the inequities, but also to propose solutions to guide policy makers. Teachers teach everyone—their students, students' families, and those who establish policies and protocols in education.

Teachers' conversations during the COVID-19 closures included words of frustration, of anger, of disbelief, but they also spoke of optimism, of empowerment, and of redirection. Teachers cannot patiently wait for changes to take place in our education system. As we move toward reopening our schools, all teachers need to lead with informing policy makers of what educators have learned from the school closures—how concerns for inequity and the social-emotional needs of our students must be addressed in order for learning to take place. By demonstrating their ability to shift with changes that will improve education for all students, teachers will be the agents for effective systemic improvement. New teachers can play a significant role in assisting their colleagues in the use of technology to support learning during these shifts.