

**Sonia Ledger, Simon Youth Academy at Outlet Marketplace (Orlando, FL)**

These past few months have been challenging to say the least. As a lead teacher I found it very hard to align my role with distance learning because my role is mostly about relationships and keeping the students safe at school, making sure day to day operations run smoothly etc. This was difficult for me at first, but I realized that I could use my leadership of the school and relationships I had built with the students and parents to continue to support our teachers while I hoped that would free them to just focus on content and best practices. I used this new ability as a tool added to my tool belt.

What I have found is that our students are NOT distance learning types. Some rocked it of course because they found less distractions to keep them from their work. But others struggled immensely. I always like to use the explanation that our students were failing because we were failing to notice them and their needs at the home schools. Therefore, they were able to hide and blend in. But at our schools, it's what we are trained to look for. We are trained to get that one student out of their comfort zone and into that place where they feel like they can now actually do work they never thought they could before. With the pandemic, we found those kids hiding again. Unable to be reached, but this time, they were home and NO ONE was able to pull them from the shadows.

Lastly, this pandemic has taught me that mental health and compassion for student's situations are what should be front and center. Many of our students, DID NOT go home to a place of warmth and love. They were surrounded by chaos. There were adults who JUST DIDN'T get it that these students weren't being lazy or were incompetent, they just lost the few people that actually cared to say hello to them every day. Those kids are the ones that would lie in bed and not get any work done and then marked as absentee, lazy, etc.

I hope these past few months have taught adults, that if they themselves were finding it difficult to function (and we have fully formed brains that can differentiate and make critical decisions), then they should have learned to give a bit of grace where grace was due.

**Dennis Herzog, Huntington Beach Unified High School District (Huntington Beach, CA)**

I have been on the front lines of public education for over 40 years and as a school psychologist for 35 of those years. The current times are the most extraordinary and difficult in my working history. Not being able to sit across from students, not being able to see their facial expressions and not being available to them on a moment's notice has been extremely difficult. Technology has been useful up to a point but does not replace the human contact or interaction that is necessary when you are trying to help a student through a crisis or difficult family situation. I will never stop trying to reach out to our students regardless of the circumstances.

**Laura Meyer, Simon Youth Academy at Port Charlotte Town Center (Port Charlotte, FL)**

As one of the more mature members of our school there have been many events I have personally witnessed during my lifetime that shifted the paradigm of how I saw my life. This epidemic is certainly one of those life changing experiences-up there with the Vietnam War, Kent State, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the 1987 financial

crash, and more recently and most upsetting the 911 attacks. Events this large make one wonder if life will ever be "normal" again. But in all of those other situations the idea of getting up and going to school was never off the table as something we would continue to do. This pandemic actually made us lose the school day and if anything reminds us of what normal is--it is our students waking up and going to school. It is the one constant that serves as the heartbeat of our everyday, normal lives. When live instruction and going to school was cancelled it was as if the structure and schedule of daily life was lost. News commentators kept explaining that it was our "new normal." Well, I have never tried to be normal, or average, or satisfied. And accordingly I know for our lives to ever be normal again we need to find a vaccine and get back to the real normal--a daily interaction between teachers and students. There are lots of theories about learning and the acquisition of knowledge, some even think electronic learning can be an effective substitute.

But I can confidently say that book learning, computer learning, distance learning or any other form of learning besides human to human learning is vacant of the necessary flexibility and caring one competent teacher can exercise to make a difference in each and every individual child's life. Life skills are learned in real time, in real life situations--not online. I saw a 100 plus year old woman on television the other day. She was born during the 1917 pandemic and she and her mother were not permitted to go home from the hospital for months. She encouraged us to not lose hope as life will get back to normal one day--words of experience that matter. So we used our phones and texted, we used our computers and video chatted, we worked the electronics and the majority of our students graduated--but a piece of paper can not replace the tears of joy and the hug at the ceremony that make the experience of going to school a measure of character and gaining a celebrated sense of success in making your goal a reality. That just has to be done for real and in person.

### **Jill Graham, Simon Youth Academy at Burlington (Burlington, MA)**

The pandemic has definitely brought many unique challenges to my role as an educator and director of our Academy. I feel that remote learning disrupted the heart of teaching by interfering with the student-teacher relationships. While we could connect virtually, it obviously is not the same as meeting in person; it was difficult to read body language, gauge engagement, check for understanding, or even notice if a student was having a bad day. So many of my students are able to thrive at our academy because of the trusting relationships they had formed with their teachers. While we tried to reach their social-emotional needs over the last few months, it was not the same as having a face-to-face conversation. No matter how hard we try, online will never be the same as in-person. While they pushed through, many students were vocal about how difficult online learning was for them.

However, having a supportive group of colleagues definitely pushed me through; even if it was just a group of teacher friends to complain about everything with or to vent my frustrations to helped me to move forward. Checking in with other schools and teachers gave me some great ideas to implement. If anything, I think this has made students, parents, and teachers all more appreciative about education and being in school. I feel, more than ever, that I need these next 2 months off as a chance to recharge, and I will try to remain hopeful that we will be back in the buildings in the fall (although I am sure on a new schedule).

## **Darla Merrill, Simon Youth Coast High School Academy (Huntington Beach, CA)**

This has been a trying time for everyone. Our district has fantastic, compassionate, empathic purposeful leadership that has this entire time encouraged all of us to focus on our families first where school is a part of that family. They also took a do no harm approach to students and their workloads knowing that each student had unique circumstances and in order to be equitable across the district we needed to be understanding in our role as an educator. For that, I am extremely grateful. Knowing that our leadership understood this unprecedented situation gave me peace of mind to focus on our new normal of teaching and supporting students at a distance. So I adjusted accordingly. I continued reaching out to all of my students and when they didn't respond, I reached out to their parents. If they were not responding to my texts, videos or emails, I would call and leave messages. I would continue to do that until I connected with someone. Always in the spirit of checking in to see how they were doing. Our district leadership always encouraged us to "do what we can, when we can and how we can" no pressures. I extended that same encouragement to my students and their families. Just encouraging them to be gentle and kind with each other. Several parents would call me to ask for advice on how to deal with their child because they were struggling. I just kept reminding them to hang in there and we would all get through this together.

After graduation, Brenda, a SYF scholarship recipient, texted me these words: "Thank you so much Ms. Merrill. Thank you for everything you taught me these years. I really do appreciate it that you always believed in me and told me I could do anything I set my mind to". My secret really is no secret, I just continued to believe in my students, give them hope that everything will work out and most of all continued communicating with them when their world as they knew it was no longer as they knew it. I know as a teacher in alternative education that many times school and the structure it provides and the interaction with their teachers is the most consistent thing in their lives. I just tried my best to maintain that for them during this COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Ido Ikudabo, Simon Youth Academy at McKinley Alternative School (Kokomo, IN)**

### Part I

It has always been my feeling that a teacher has the right to fail. Since teaching is, as it has often been described, an art rather than a science, our successes can seem fleeting or far away, while our failures are glaring, obvious, and immediate. My own outlook has always been that a teacher's, as well as a person's reach should exceed his or her grasp. If a teacher's effort, predicated upon his or her careful preparation, intelligent conceptions, and solid execution do not meet the hopes for success, something is still gained through the experience. In the process of stretching, growth inevitably takes place for both the teacher and the class. Without that extra stretch, not only is our personal and professional growth arrested, we are almost inevitably consigned to a fate of vegetation and deterioration.

Consider for a moment the examples of our colleagues who have just recently risked the prospect of failure, and whose reach stretched them to their utmost. Without their courage and adventurousness, we would have not been granted the opportunity to see the smiling faces of four girls who experienced flying to Washington D.C. for the first time in their lives. Some of our outstanding teachers also took students to visit the Indiana Statehouse in Indianapolis, complete virtual physical educational classes, and most importantly spearhead virtual learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic. These are but a few recent examples themselves of triumphs that resulted from teacher's reaching and stretching.

The capacity to take risks and to face up to both difficult and complex matters, will help us to meet the enormous challenges represented by the ECA, the basic competency tests, and the need to improve student attendance to name but a few. We may fail and we may achieve only partial success, but at least we will not be prisoners of cynicism or hostages to despair.

### Part II:

These are some of my reflections looking back at 2019-2020 academic school year. At 7:05 a.m. a student arrived at our school front door #1 wanting to come in. I vividly remember asking the student "Why are you here so early?" The student replied by stating that her mother had to go to work and she's her only ride to school. She also said that she was not fit to ride the school bus due to chronic back pain. I gently let the student in the door, then proceeded to welcome her back to McKinley saying my favorite daily word "Merry Christmas". With obvious avidity on this student's face, then and there I knew it was going to be a good and eventful school year! We had some ups and down in filling some teaching positions due to unavailability and or shortages of substitutes in the districts, so we decided to shuffle staff in order to cover one class after the other.

We hired a full-time security officer for the first time in the history of our school. A teacher transferred in from one of our Middle Schools stands in as a replacement for our veteran Math teacher. We moved a para-professional from Kinsey Youth Center to McKinley to better serve wounded students 1-1 and to conduct supervision of students during lunch. Our building custodian has never said no when it comes to prioritizing student safety, and students having fun in the gym. As a result, he took it upon himself to help supervise student activities in the gym.

Toward the middle of the school year we lost a student Dalton Fishers to gun violence; a month later we lost another student James Gray to gun violence. I was devastated but kept praying to God for strength and provision to do more good things for our students. We had students that transferred out of the district due to home instabilities. Then we gained students from neighboring schools with over 100 assertive disciplinary referrals; the good news is that we had a couple of students that graduated midterm. Thanks to all of our staff for supporting our students in the midst of tough situations. Winter wasn't too bad this school year, because we only had a couple of delays and closed twice. We overcame the snowy and icy roads.

It is my pleasure to say that we started our school year strong, and ended it even stronger in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic (washing hands for 20 seconds, not touching our face, wearing face masks, and "social distancing" 6 feet). George Floyd's wrongful death in Minnesota and Breonna Taylor's wrongful death from the south side of Louisville, Kentucky led to more police scrutiny due to them being killed by the police. Anger is building even as there are calls for a judicial review of the case involving Ahmaud Arbery, a 25 year old who was chased down by a father and son in Brunswick, Georgia. All of these events have led to protests, which have included people even setting buildings on fire and looting goods and products from stores across the Nation. The President ordered the Military to keep peace on land and mocked governors and local leaders by calling them weak. President Trump was found hiding in a White House bunker and walking across the street to have the church as a backdrop for his photo while holding a bible on his right hand. He then ordered the police and military to disseminate peaceful protesters with tear gas and rubber bullets. This later caused more riots in the major cities in America. Lastly a 17 year old former student Jada Ellis was shot in the neck but thank God she's alive. I met with her mother on Wednesday, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020 at approximately 9:05 to discuss her daughter and how she's coping with such tragic accident. She affirmed that it was God that saved her daughter's life. She stated that when she was at Riley Hospital in Indianapolis and told her that I called to check on her, she smiled and said thanks so much for caring and prayers. Other good news is limited to the time when Washington, D.C., resident Rahul Duby realized dozens of protesters were facing pepper spray and arrested for violating curfew that Monday night. He did what he says anyone else would do. He invited all 70 people into his home to spend the night.

Part III:

When I look back and reflect on all that we have been through in the academic school year 2019-2020, we graduated 17 seniors with Core-40 from our school. Virtual graduation went well; parents and families were grateful. We had one scholarship recipient **Ms. Ciara Rose Jewell**. Simon Youth Foundation provided all our graduates with \$25 gift certificates. That is an awesome credit to all of our professional educators for rolling up their sleeves to work with our students, make phone calls, visit homes, retrieve students' laptop devices and bring them back to McKinley. These same super incredible educators also served meals to people in our communities. During these uncertain times, I truly found out the fundamentals behind students choosing to learn. We, as educators empower them to make decisions about their own learning while guiding them through the learning process. I also found out that as the content became more complex, about 80% of students didn't have the skill set needed to keep up. I am blessed with staff that are always willing to reach out and support their learners' social, emotional, physical, and metacognitive skills. We conducted a survey for our students concerning their experience with E-Learning. The survey also included questions about how we can better

assess them so that they can place their self in a zone of proximal development where they can learn best. ***The data collected is very valuable.***

1. What was the hardest thing for you personally about participating in E-Learning/Distance Learning?
  - 55.6% (15 of 27) of students stated the hardest things for them was not being able to get help with an assignment immediately from a teacher
  - 37% (10 of 27) of students stated that the hardest thing for them was finding the time to do their work or balancing other duties such as work or family obligations with E-Learning/Distance Learning.
  - 7.4 (2 of 27) of students stated they had significant technology issues when trying to access the assignments
2. What was the easiest thing for you personally about participating in E-Learning/Distance Learning?
  - 77.8 (21 of 27) of students stated the easiest thing for them was that the length of the assignments were short or very easy to do
  - 3.7% (1 of 27) of students stated that it was all easy, once they got their computer to work correctly
3. What could the teacher do better to make the E-Learning/Distance Learning experience better for you, the students, in the future?
  - 63% (17 of 27) of students stated they wished the teacher would have some sort of weekly virtual meeting with them on-line to help them if needed.
  - 37% (10 of 27) of students stated that the teacher should have provided easier access for them to find their assignments. They were confused as to where their assignment were located.

Our recommendation/Reflection is as follows:

- Place all assignments in one place so there will be easier access for students.
- Teach time management skills in class during basic skills period.
- Teach students how to access assignments in a digital world.
- Schedule weekly virtual meetings with students using one source of video technology (Webex, Canvas or classroomology) that the students have access to, or possibly daily help sessions where students can attend virtually during a set time frame.

#### Part IV

I must further emphasize that my experience over the course of the past few months were no doubt challenging. The stress of the unknown highly affected my staff and I. The last in-person class week had its own challenges in that there was so much information circulating. We had to remain calm while keeping our students calm at the same time because of the uncertainty.

Having to switch to online instruction practically overnight was an interesting experience for all. It took me a couple of weeks to develop a structure that flowed well and worked for our students and myself. It was very difficult not to physically see them, and I was concerned about their wellbeing on a daily basis. The virtual calls helped very much when I was trying to get any of the students and staff on the call. I also had to assist my family at home with their own needs. Overall, I was extremely proud of how well our students adapted and did their best to persevere. I would conclude by saying that students do like the flexibility of e-learning. They really liked being able to work when they chose to. Most students felt they needed face-to-face contact with teachers in order to effectively learn though. Our students' learning seemed to suffer immensely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before the word came down that we were switching to the Long Distance/E Learning mode of instruction in March, I honestly thought that we were probably the most prepared staff in our district. After starting the E Learning/Long Distance learning instruction, we realized that we are prepared in some areas, but are, severely lacking in others such as student preparedness, individual subject material content, and personal preparedness, which all lead to unnecessary stress and anxiety for both our staff and the students.

I was under the assumption that most of our students could easily access course assignments and materials online either through Canvas or Google Classroom. After a few days into the whole E Learning/Long Distance Education model, I realized that many of our students were extremely confused as to where to get their assignments in each class. Consequently, we immediately changed and adapted our method of delivering and making materials available to better serve the students. We then realized that we had adequately prepared ourselves, but neglected to show and model for students exactly what we were expecting from them on a daily basis. We plan to implement that in one of the first days of school in the upcoming school year.

Almost immediately, we realized that we did not have enough material in a couple of our classes for students to continue their education for a substantial amount of time. Our staff ran around, at the last minute, and got the chapters of content scanned and put in place for students, but it created a lot of unnecessary anxiety for our staff and the students. One way we think that this can be resolved in the future is to allow the teachers at McKinley to have access to all online content related to the books for the classes they are teaching. Personally, I found out that one of our staff had to create material for his Geography class for each day of E Learning/Distance education which again created stress and took valuable time away from students.

Personally, working remote from home and using E Learning/Distance Education was difficult because of family responsibilities. One of my staff was the sole caregiver for her four-year-old grandson for the first seven weeks of the experience. Our staff had to learn to balance their lesson preparedness and student interactions, while watching and tending to their children's needs and wants. In addition, they had to ensure their high schooler was completing lessons and turning them in to their teachers. Our staff learned to plan and manage their time accordingly, and eventually figured things out to make a smooth-running machine. I commended our staff for making themselves available to students either through email, virtual chats, text messages, or even phone calls when they needed help, not just during regular school hours

All in all, I think the E Learning/Distance learning experience was a success. Our staff adapted, rose above issues, and conquered the tasks that they encountered. They met students when and where they needed help, on their schedule. They were flexible on due dates, and really tried to accommodate students' needs by printing assignments for them to complete. I am proud of our staff and students, and I will do a better job preparing my staff and students if this chaotic situation comes up again. The bottom line is that we made it, and I am extremely proud of that! Our teachers at McKinley are all truly servant leaders, and they are appreciated!

**Johnike Shuler, Simon Youth Judson Learning Academy at Rolling Oaks Mall (San Antonio, TX)**

These past few months as an educator, a mother, and a wife of a first responder have made me more grateful, to say the least. I know this reflection is about my perspective as an educator; however, I realized that when I work from home all my roles were being juggled equally and simultaneously (and there truly were no vacation days). These months have made me value relationships, communication, my support system, a self-care routine (which became extremely important) and the opportunities I have to impact the lives of the people (especially my students) who I come in contact with on a daily basis.

At the beginning this pandemic felt like an extended Spring Break and since I was returning from my Bader Fellowship (which was an incredible experience in and of itself), I was very grateful for the extra time off to rest and I was certain my students were equally grateful, as well.

However, a week turned into two, and two weeks turned into a month and then everyone was told to social distance and stay safe-at-home, unless you were considered an essential worker. This is when our current situation began to look less short-term and more long-term and I began to have deep concern for all of my students and how they were adapting. I was particularly worried about the ones who lack a support system at home and were forced to distance from the most consistent relationship they knew, their Judson Learning Academy Family.

Therefore, it became that much more vital that we made contact with our students. All of them. Where ever they were. Some of our students did not have working phones. Some of our students changed their phone number and what we had on file was not current. We could not reach some for weeks...even months. Therefore, we placed their names on a list with hopes that the district's task force would go searching for them at their last known address. (We now know how extremely important it is for us to do everything we can to keep student contact information current.)

Once we made contact with students, we wanted to make sure our students' physical and social emotional needs were being met. Though this is not how we began. Originally, we started out with making sure the students had everything they needed to continue working on their course work – the work itself (either electronically or on paper) along with district Chromebooks that were being loaned to students. Then we realized that many of our students were having difficulty adapting to not attending school daily, not seeing their friends and teachers daily, not having the in-person support of their teachers (though we attempted to use Zoom to provide this support virtually) and not knowing if or when schools will reopen. In addition, many families were experiencing financial hardship and fears from the uncertain times. This caused us to focus our communication more on student well-being and slightly less on coursework and student progress.

However; the challenging part was making sure that, even in all the grace and flexibility we were providing students, we were still helping them stay on track to complete their courses in hopes of a graduation at the end of the school year (since we were not sure at the time if a graduation would take place and/or what it would look like). We also wanted to make sure our students were still getting a valuable education that would prove beneficial to them in their post-high school endeavors. I recall this topic being something Principal Jennifer Garrett at Simon Youth Kelley Academy was very passionate about herself and kept reiterating to me during my fellowship time with her. It was at the time, and I am sure still is, very important to Principal Garrett that when her students graduate from Kelley Academy they have a diploma that “means something”. I believe this is something that should be important, and is important, to all of us as educators.

Our academy environment must focus on building on relationships, teaching relevant curriculum and creating a unique learning environment where students are able to overcome and adapt to the obstacles that life has placed in their way. All while helping preparing students for their next stage in life. I know this to be true about all four of the SYF Academies I had the privilege of visiting in Tennessee (SYA at Hickory Hollow, SY Kelley Academy at Lincoln Park Center, SYA at Old Cockrill, and SYA at Opry Mills) and I am certain this is true of all the SYF Academies across the country.

As a teacher who has been in the classroom for 14 years, with 4 of those years at JLA, changing and adjusting to circumstances that are out of my control has become very familiar territory. This pandemic highlighted the importance of my role as an educator - meeting my students’ physiological, social emotional, and educational needs in an environment that is subject to change at a moment’s notice. Consequently, it is absolutely important that we, as educators, move forward with the mission of building relationships and educating our students (which may look different in our future). That we extend grace to ourselves, as well as our students. And for me personally, I try to start and end my day with a prayer, such as this one:

God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

Reinhold Neibuhr (1892-1971)