

Teaching in a Pandemic: Conversations with Teachers around the United States

Edited by Michelle Vanhala



Four teachers from across the U.S. share reflections after a year of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching during a pandemic has been, well... unprecedented, to say the least. Kaleidoscope staff member Michelle Vanhala talked with four different teachers from various contexts across the nation to get their take on teaching this past year. Read on to learn about the lows and the highs, the tips and the tricks, and the lessons learned from teaching in the time of coronavirus.

Monique Rivera-Velez teaches earth science at an international school in Maryland.

Here's what she has to say about this year's challenges:

There's been a lot of social-emotional support that was needed. It's really hard for students to learn content when they have other things to worry about. Some of my students had to start working because their parents lost their jobs. Many don't have reliable internet; some aren't able to log in at certain times.

I went to Puerto Rico to visit my family in November, and the internet in Puerto Rico is not the best, so I got to experience firsthand how frustrating it is to have slow internet. The kids were like "Miiiiiss!" And I was like "Yes, I know! How do you guys do this? This is so frustrating! You are so patient; this is so much!" I would have bailed a

long time ago.

The rewards:

I just need to take things one at a time. You do what you can. And I've been telling that to kids over and over again: "It's okay if your internet is not working. It's okay. If you're having trouble, communicate. Let me know how to help you." I'm not giving kids a break, but at the same time I'm being flexible with them. Because we're in the middle of a pandemic. You do what you can.

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About self-care:

Teachers work a lot. I work really hard at being a teacher and planning lessons. It consumes most of my life. When we went on our first two week closure, I didn't know what to do. I'm not teaching—so who am I? What is life without teaching? I realized that I am more than just a teacher. Life should be more than your job. Teaching is part of who I am, but at the same time it's not all that I am.

I'm not a superhero. At the beginning, I was worried: "What about this, what if this happens? Where are the kids, are they okay?" But worrying was not productive. If I'm not okay, how can I help them? I hope that if they need something they will let me know. I can share resources and make sure they know how to advocate, but I'm not Superwoman. I do what I can. That has brought peace, and I've been able to set that boundary.

What needs to change?

Testing. Just get rid of testing. Testing does not measure what students learned. It just measures how well they can take a test. Get rid of that. Do more project-based learning that actually teaches them skills that they can use in life.

I am really excited about project-based learning. I've realized that learning more about PBL and applying that to my classroom has made this hard time so much better. I look forward to it. I look for the bright side. And hold onto it.

What do you hope to hold on to?

Online learning has made my teaching more accessible. When we go back, it will not truly be going "back." I want to keep the technology skills that I've learned and continue with them even in person. By that point, I will have survived quarantine teaching. I can do anything. I'll be happy to be there, happy I'm with my students, and happy I get to teach.



Lee Ferguson teaches AP and IB Biology in a large suburban school in Texas.

On challenges:

For us, what "hybrid" means is that we have students in person and online simultaneously. It's been very difficult to find anything that's positive about that particular set up. Those of us that teach science courses or arts courses that require hands-on learning components or some sort of performative component to our course, the issue there becomes how to deliver instruction. In my



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situation, because I have students both in person and online—how do I do that and do it equitably?

The problem with teaching science without a lab is that you lose the wonder. Because the wonder comes from discovery. Honestly—I tell the kids this all the time—to learn science you have to do it. It's an active process.

What was rewarding about this past year?

I had a girl at the beginning of the school year who wanted to drop my class. So we sat down, we chatted, and she let me know what was bothering her. In the end, she decided not to drop the course. In the last week of school, she took the final exam and did really well. She finished the semester with an A, and I wrote her an email. I said, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that you did really well on your exam. I appreciate all the hard work that you've done, and I'm very proud of you." The next day I got an email back; when she wrote me back, I almost cried. She said, "You have no idea how much that meant to me for you to say that. I am so glad that you are my teacher, and I am so fortunate to have you here to support me. Thank you so much, I am going to work so hard this next semester." I don't care how the rest of the school year goes—if this is the pinnacle then that's fine. It was the best gift I got all semester long. I did my job.

What needs to change?

I'm going to state an unpopular opinion. Grades. They need to go away. There's a huge movement in education to make grades disappear because they're meaningless. What is an 85% without feedback, without

documentation, without evidence for why you're giving that grade? What does it mean to have a 70%? What does it mean to have a 60%? We as a whole system need to look at grades. What is the purpose of a grade? Why are we continuing to measure students like this? It's not fair. It's not equitable. I don't think it's right. That's something that needs to change. If we have learned nothing from this whole experience, then shame on us.

What do you hope to hold on to?

Another unpopular opinion: Online school that's delivered by the local public school system needs to remain as a choice for families. For some students and families, this method of instruction works. Overwhelmingly, the kids who have elected to stay at home for the whole school year say, "This allows me flexibility to work at my own pace." For a lot of kids and a lot of families, this should be an option.

From the teacher perspective, virtual learning gives you the opportunity as an instructor to innovate in ways that you probably couldn't in a traditional classroom. Schools are so locked into the way they do things traditionally that it sometimes gives them tunnel vision. They don't want to look outside of the boundaries that keep them doing things the way they've always done them. Whereas with an online system, teachers have a lot more leeway to design an appropriate curriculum, to design appropriate assessments, to do so much more that they could not do in a traditional classroom setting. Schools should make this an option for families, and I think it should be an option for teachers too.

Any other thoughts to share?

My kids are lucky to be going to school during a historic time for biology. A year ago this pandemic was descending upon the globe for this novel virus for which there was no vaccine. And less than a year later—boom—science was able to come together and say "look, we've got this vaccine!" I think it's really cool that the kids are getting to see that in real time. The convergence of all of these things happening at the same time has been pretty cool, even in the most difficult teaching situation possible.



Rebecca Harwood is a 9th- and 10th-grade English in rural southeastern Michigan.

On challenges:

Student engagement has been a huge challenge. I'll call on kids over Zoom, and I can hear the PlayStation in the background. It's hard to compete with the distractions at home while trying to teach them and engage them in a

virtual classroom.

Another challenge would be dealing with everything going a lot slower virtually. It's been hard realizing that this year is more about socio-emotional learning than it is about the content. I found that when I take the time to have my dog jump up on my lap and we joke around and everyone brings their cat or their dog forward—it makes everyone happy and engaged. We need to put aside the content; it's going to take a while. We might go for longer, but it's important to make kids laugh.

What was rewarding about this past year?

We had just finished reading *The Crucible* and I was trying to decide: do I do an essay? I was worried that an essay just was not going to be engaging—what a boring way to finish such a great unit. I knew I needed to do something that was going to get students working with each other, something more motivating. The solution? A virtual trial. The question was: Should the character Abigail Williams be charged with murder?

I split students into groups: a defense, prosecution, and a jury. Each group had an outline to work on and each person had a role. Attorneys had to work with their witnesses to come up with questions and answers. The jury's job was to come up with a rubric, find evidence, and take notes during trials, and then they had to deliberate and come to a conclusion.

We had two days of trial that were very direct and structured. Students for the first time this year were actually engaged. They were showing up to class right at the start; they were excited to get into their groups. Everytime I jumped into the breakout rooms they were talking, which I never get to hear. They dressed up. They were amazing. My attendance was the highest it's been. It was awesome to see them engage.



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What needs to change?

Assessments need to change. Being all virtual, and assessing virtually, I realized that students literally have unlimited resources. They can Google anything. We need to get away from the standard, traditional test: multiple choice, short answer, the same questions that are passed on year after year. Even essays: there are so many resources out there for kids to jumble up essays, to copy and paste them so that they're not technically plagiarized even though they haven't written a word. Student assessment needs to change. It needs to be more project-based, more competency-based; we need to get away from sitting down, taking a test, and as soon as it's turned in, it's done.

What do you hope to hold on to?

I have been more organized this year than I have ever been. I didn't start out that way, but I realized quickly that I needed a system. I have all of my topics arranged by week in Google Classroom now. Putting in the materials and having a retake area and a class materials area for kids to go in and quickly find stuff has been absolutely amazing. It puts so much accountability on the students. It's all there, it's all digital, it's all time-stamped. I'm definitely going to continue to do that moving into the future.



Brenda Minjares teaches physics in a large urban school in southern California.

On challenges:

Over my six years of teaching, I had developed strategies for accessing student thinking by asking them directly



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and waiting for verbal or nonverbal responses. I just didn't have that access to their thinking when teaching online. My whole job revolves around being able to work with student ideas and thinking, and I felt like I wasn't able to be effective online in the same ways that I was in person. I love the technical aspects of what I do—working with student ideas and discourse. Not having that as something I could use as a strategy was really hard.

On rewards:

My fear was that students would lose interest in school or not see themselves as being successful because of what has happened—because of changes that were made around them, many without their consent or without being transparent.

I had five key values that I had identified that I wanted to keep in mind throughout the school year. These were "compassion," "flexibility," "grace," "relationships," and "keep it simple." These were the things I want to focus on. What was validating was that a lot of students felt very cared for. They highlighted my kindness and the level of understanding that I had with them in their student feedback forms. And that felt validating, because I did not prioritize rigor. Rigor was not on this list of values. Compassion and kindness were my intentions, and I'm glad that I stuck with that, because it added value to their experience in school.

At the end of every virtual class session I told them I loved them. I remember when I decided to do that I felt a little silly and awkward. I do love them, but I wasn't used to telling them. Before I'd dismiss them, I'd say "Okay, if no one's told you yet today, I love you and I care about you all, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your day." As the semester went on, some of them would tell me they loved me too in the chat. Those little things were so rewarding, and made it feel okay. They felt seen, and that was most important to me.

What needs to change?

The way that we onboard new teachers is something that needs to change. If we are trying to redesign school to meet the needs of all students, which is not originally what school was designed to do, we need to give more attention to new teachers and give them a support system.

I also hope we're taking the opportunity as a broader community to continue to have conversations about equitable grading practices, because this pandemic has definitely brought to light a lot of the inequities. It's exacerbated where those gaps are in opportunities to learn and get the quality education that everyone deserves.

What do you hope to hold on to?

We're working with people. On theme with the values I chose this year, I want to hold onto the humanity. I'm holding onto this belief that we're working to change a system that was never designed to do what it is that we're trying to do, which is to meet the needs of all students.

Anything else to share?

I think it's important for me to say that in August I was having serious doubts about returning as a teacher. Which triggered some identity issues—what else am I going to do? I was very seriously considering not being a teacher anymore. Thankfully there have been enough small miracles that I credit to my district, to my union, to myself, and to what I've learned about sustainability and self-care. I feel more assured that I want to stay in this profession. There are a lot of opportunities for me to use this experience and my voice to hopefully affect positive change. I'm hopeful.

Citation

Vanhala, Michelle. (2021). Teaching in a pandemic: Conversations with teachers around the United States. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 26–30.

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Michelle Vanhala

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Michelle is passionate about elevating teacher voices, advocating for equitable grading practices, and working with her colleagues to create and implement authentic, interdisciplinary learning experiences. Reach Michelle on Twitter at [@MsVanhala](https://twitter.com/MsVanhala) or by email at michelle.vanhala@knowlesteachers.org.



Lee Ferguson

is the lead AP/IB Biology teacher at Allen High School in Allen, Texas. An award-winning educator, she has taught all levels of biology throughout her 25-year career and has taught AP and IB Biology for nearly 18 years.

She strives to make her classroom a place where students are free to be themselves, valued and loved as they are, and encouraged and empowered to ask questions and investigate the world around them. Lee has served as an AP Reader since 2006 and has been an AP Consultant since 2016. She also serves as the moderator of the College Board AP Biology Teachers' Online Community and is an HHMI BioInteractive Ambassador. Lee enjoys empowering other educators (regardless of subject area) through building their capacity to lead learning. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, looks forward to traveling again soon, and loves a good book! Reach Lee on Twitter at [@thebiospace](https://twitter.com/thebiospace) or by email at mrsleeferg@gmail.com.



Brenda Minjares,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, teaches physics and AP Physics in San Diego County in California. She serves as science department chair and PLC lead, where she pioneers modeling physics for all, Socratic seminars

in science, and standards-based grading. Brenda is a strong advocate for sustainable practices for teachers and recently launched an online brand (The Sustained Teacher, [@thesustainedteacher](https://www.instagram.com/thesustainedteacher) on Instagram) to support new and veteran teachers in developing their own practices for sustaining a career in teaching. Find Brenda on Twitter at [@bmminj](https://twitter.com/bmminj) or at brenda.minjares@knowlesteachers.org.



Monique Rivera-Velez,

a 2018 Knowles Teaching Fellow born and raised in Puerto Rico, teaches at International High School in Langley Park, Maryland. Her fascination with science began with after school activities like visiting

her hometown's bioluminescent bay "Bahia Mosquito" when she was in third grade. These experiences with nature and 4-H summer camps inspired her to become an educator. During Monique's second year of teaching, she discovered project-based learning and never looked back to traditional teaching methods. One of her career dreams is to start a school greenhouse where students can grow their own vegetables and create a student-led market for the Langley Park community. Reach Monique at monique.riveravelez@knowlesteachers.org.