



William Raymond, 5, checks his school's homework page in Conway Township, Michigan, in farm country northwest of Detroit. CODY SCANLON FOR LIVINGSTON DAILY

## Creative classrooms

COVID-19 disrupted the end of one school year and the start of another. But it couldn't stifle enterprising educators' commitment to learning

**Matt Alderton** Special to USA TODAY

Notwithstanding fire drills, ornery class clowns and mischief in the presence of substitute teachers, classrooms most of the time are orderly, predictable places that thrive on the comfort of routine. But when states began issuing stay-at-home orders in March in response to COVID-19, educators everywhere had to throw routine in the wastebasket like yesterday's homework.

Forced to re-engineer their classrooms and lesson plans for virtual and hybrid learning, teachers and administrators faced extraordinary circumstances that have challenged them professionally as well as personally. While their efforts helped students continue to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, their creativity, compassion and commitment also taught by example something far more useful: resilience.

Here, educators from seven different schools share what they did, how they did it, and why.

See **LEARNING**, Page 29

## Learning

Continued from Page 28

### SAFETY IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

When school started this fall, families in the Massapequa School District on New York's Long Island could choose in-person or online learning. The former requires plexiglass barriers, masks and vigorous handwashing — which might sound unpleasant to parents, but for students has actually been fun.

That's thanks to educators like first-year teacher Amanda Corbett, who teaches first grade at East Lake Elementary School in Massapequa Park. To make her classroom as happy as it is healthy, she transformed kids' desks into cars, with plexiglass barriers as the windows and windshield. She got students into the idea on the first day of school by having them make license plates. When she needs students' attention, she says "flat tire," to which the class responds with "ssshhh" like the sound of a tire losing air. And when it's time to sanitize the space, students wash their cars to the tune of Christina Aguilera's "Car Wash." Wipes have to be disposed of by the end of the song, which makes cleaning the classroom fun *and* fast.

"I feel that my creativity and enthusiasm help to make the students feel excited to learn," Corbett says. "There are times I question if I am doing things right ... However, I want to follow my own advice and preach what I teach, and that is a growth mindset. The world is learning new information about this virus every day, and so am I.

"I am viewing every challenge as an opportunity to grow as an educator."

### OUTDOOR EDUCATION

The weather in Colorado can be unpredictable: warm and sunny one day, cold and snowy the next — whether it's January or June. But that hasn't deterred Aspen Academy in Greenwood Village, Colorado, from creating new outdoor education spaces designed for safety and stimulation.

Because it wanted to host students on campus in the fall, the private K-8 school hatched a plan for teachers to hold 75% of their classes outdoors.

"We know that being outside is great for COVID risk mitigation. And oh, by the way, kids love learning outside, so it's ac-



Schools across the U.S. have had to reconfigure their classrooms for hybrid learning, in which some students attend in person and others are online in order to reduce the number of people in each room at any given time. Desks are farther apart, masks are required, and the lights are often dimmed because so much is happening on computer screens. Above, Paramus Catholic High School in New Jersey, where students alternate three days in school and three days virtual. CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM



**Kristina Scala of Aspen Academy in Colorado. The school is holding 75% of classes outdoors and has configured its campus to make that possible.** COURTESY OF KRISTINA SCALA

tually a lot of fun for them," says Aspen's head of school, Kristina Scala. She had wooden decks built on unused corners of her campus to serve as platforms for large canvas classroom tents.

The tents were originally designed for "glamping," a kind of luxury camping popular at resorts and near national parks. Each tent has flaps that can be opened or closed to control air flow, and all are snow-rated to allow for continued use in winter.

"There's no bad weather; there's just bad clothes," Scala says. The school also converted a former drainage pit into a boulder-lined amphitheater that can accommodate three socially distant outdoor classes at a time. "It's an opportunity for kids to learn in a way that's quite unique, and they're really loving it."

### CLOSING THE TECH GAP

For some families, the transition to online learning has been seamless. For others, the technology that was supposed to facilitate education has actually gotten in the way of it. That was the case in Idaho's Boise School District, according to Megan Axtman, reading specialist and technology coordinator at Taft Elementary School, where 97% of the student body is from low-income families.

"We couldn't assume in any case that students could simply log in and get to their learning," Axtman says. "It's just never that simple."

Students who couldn't access online learning in the spring instead picked up

See **LEARNING**, Page 30



First-grade teacher Jamie Crum of Lincoln Elementary in Jackson, Tennessee, cheers for her students during their morning meeting. Crum, who is in her first year of teaching, doesn't get to see all of her students often because many of her lessons are pre-recorded for them to watch at home. STEPHANIE AMADOR / THE JACKSON SUN

## Learning

Continued from Page 29

paper learning packets at school each Monday. Come fall, the school district wanted to do better. It reallocated its budget to provide take-home technology to every student in the district, which began the school year online, then switched to a hybrid model for all but 4,000 students who elected to spend the entire year doing distance learning.

To prepare students for remote education, teachers hosted "device deployment days" during which they distributed iPads to kindergartners and first-graders, Chromebooks to second-through sixth-graders and mobile hot-spots to students without internet access at home. They also taught students how to access online learning platforms — sometimes with the help of translators, since 30% of students are refugees.



"Education has to be equitable," says Megan Axtman of Taft Elementary School in Boise, Idaho.

COURTESY OF MEGAN AXTMAN

"Education, in general, has to be equitable," Axtman says. "This means ... making sure that the child's circumstances are not obstacles to achieving their educational potential."

### THE SHOW MUST GO ON

"All the world's a stage," William Shakespeare famously wrote. But where can you perform when the world's staying home?



At Robert Chalwell's school for the arts in California, "we're ... doing a little bit of the impossible."

COURTESY OF ROBERT CHALWELL

That was the question facing Contra Costa School of the Performing Arts in Walnut Creek, California. A public charter school for secondary students interested in arts, it's the kind of place that thrives on creativity and community — both of which are challenged by the school's current online format.

"As creators and creators in training, our inspiration comes directly from our lived experiences as parts of the diverse communities we belong to. For months,

our ability to engage fully with those communities has been restricted," says principal Robert Chalwell. "But for many artists, the experience of being restricted has, in its own way, inspired expressions of our creative selves."

That sentiment is evident in students' work. Voice students, for example, are training remotely with noted a capella singer Deke Sharon and working toward staging a live-streamed choir concert. Dance students, meanwhile, will perform solo at outdoor venues, then document their growth by juxtaposing recordings of those performances with video of them practicing at home through distance learning.

As for community, students have it covered thanks to virtual spirit weeks with themed days like "Throwback Thursday," during which students dressed in the style of their favorite decade and sang karaoke via Zoom.

"Many of our students ... were initially convinced that robust and responsive

See **LEARNING**, Page 32



Everyone needs a home office these days: Sixth-grader Malik Gordon sits through a lesson at home in Nashville, Tennessee. Malik, a student at Nashville Classical Charter School, is continuing to adapt to the challenges of remote learning with the assistance of his mother, Victoria Gordon. ANDREW NELLES / THE TENNESSEAN

## Learning

Continued from Page 30

school community could not be achieved) in a distance learning model," Chalwell says. "We're ... doing a little bit of the impossible."

### A LESSON IN CONNECTION

At Hercules Middle School in Hercules, California, seventh-grade world history teacher Joseph Glatzer teaches about great wars, ancient civilizations



**Middle school history teacher Joseph Glatzer says some students open up more on Zoom chat that when in person.**

COURTESY OF JOSEPH GLATZER

and powerful rulers.

This year, however, the most important thing he's teaching is how to stay connected in a disconnected world.

"Even during regular times, middle school can be a challenging, transitional period in life. So, I try to put myself in their shoes," Glatzer says. "I try to embody the things I liked the most about all my teachers ... and good communication is very high on that list."

Glatzer's district, the West Contra Costa Unified School District, remains 100% virtual this fall. Teachers stay connected to students through virtual homerooms and office hours. During the former, students complete anonymous surveys about their emotions and dis-

cuss topics such as empathy and anxiety. During the latter, they build rapport with teachers and get help with assignments.

For Glatzer, the most impactful connections often occur during regular classes — and that's because of the online format, not in spite of it.

"I have found that some students are more comfortable opening up a bit in the chat versus saying (their feelings) out loud," says Glatzer, who plans to keep Zoom chats open even when students are in the classroom with him again, so introverts who thrive in that medium can continue doing so. "I take my responsibility as an educator very seriously. It's

**See LEARNING, Page 34**

## Learning

Continued from Page 32

not just about teaching the history curriculum. It's also about supporting students' social-emotional learning and giving them a safe space to discuss how they feel about distressing things happening in the world."

### FROM ILLNESS, INNOVATION

If necessity is the mother of invention, the pandemic's silver lining might be the birth of something teachers have always wanted: smaller classes.

So says Stephanie Musser, founder and CEO of Candeo Schools, which operates public K-8 charter schools in Peoria and Scottsdale, Arizona. Although Musser spent the summer planning in earnest, Candeo's fall reopening didn't come into focus until the 11th hour, when she conceived its new "Integrated On-Campus Learning" model, wherein students attend school onsite for three weeks out of every month, then spend one week learning at home.

"This integrated approach allows us to operate at a maximum of 75% capacity each day while affording students a solid block of instruction in person," Musser says. Class sizes have been reduced to 16 or fewer people, giving students more opportunities to engage with teachers and lessons while also facilitating social distancing and campus cleanliness. "The positive outcomes for both students and public health are evident."

Parents are more engaged, too, as families that share the same distance-learning week have forged community in the form of "Parent Pods."

"Our hope is that everyone gets to know the families who share distance weeks and find ways to gather, learn together and support one another," Musser says. She hopes that the model will become a permanent option at Candeo.

"I believe disruptive times like these are breeding grounds for innovation, and I get giddy when I think of the possibilities," she says.

### EXERCISING INGENUITY

Distance learning has taught students to exercise their minds from home. What kids need now more than ever, however, is to exercise their bodies, says Brian Nassif, a physical education teacher at



Nicole Wells sends love to her third-grade students at Oglethorpe Avenue Elementary school in Athens, Georgia. The school's principal, Bipul Singh, says it has been an adjustment to have teachers in the building giving lessons that he can hear as he walks the halls, but with no accompanying student sounds. "The kids are here but not here."

JOSHUA L. JONES/  
USA TODAY NETWORK



Plastic shields atop tables help provide a bit of hygienic separation in an art classroom at Liberty Common Elementary in Fort Collins, Colorado.

BETHANY BAKER / THE COLORADOAN

San Diego's Albert Einstein Academies, a public K-8 charter school that has continued with distance learning this fall.

"For many, it took being separated from others, being stuck inside and not having P.E., recess and sports to realize the importance that all of these experiences play in the quality of our lives," Nassif says. "The challenges that result from being stuck in front of screens without real social interaction are now clear to us all; it's right there in our living rooms."

To keep remote students active, Nassif has combined apps like HomeCourt — which uses artificial intelligence to teach and track athletic movements in a gamified fashion — with a makeshift green screen (i.e., a green bedsheet) and video

editing software. The result is interactive video lessons that he posts on YouTube, where students can watch and follow along. So far, he's taught everything from line dancing and jumping rope to throwing and striking.

When skills require special equipment that students might not have at home, he improvises. To practice underhand tennis serves, for example, he instructed students to hit balled-up socks into laundry baskets with shoes.

"When this all started, a little extra screen time didn't seem like a big deal. But now that it's gone on for so long, we're starting to see the effects on students' emotions, motivation and happiness," Nassif says. "We need to get our kids moving and playing again."