

FEATURE TEACHER

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What is a challenge you have faced teaching in during a pandemic in 2020?

The main challenge that I have faced as a teacher during the 2020/2021 school year is getting students to complete and turn in their virtual assignments. I send out regular reminders on Schoology, publish detailed weekly agendas, and give verbal reminders on in-person days, but many students still choose to not complete their assignments at home and submit them to Schoology. Paper copies are provided for any student that does not have reliable internet access, but those are rarely returned.

How do you support building a positive and safe online learning environment for your students?

I provide a positive and safe online learning environment by setting and enforcing ground rules for conduct and communication during Teams meetings. I communicate these expectations before our first Teams meeting is held. I also provide this information for parents to review on Schoology. During our meetings I monitor the meeting chat and control what is shared with the class. All materials and resources that I use for instruction have been pre-screened and are collected from reputable sites. I welcome students at the beginning of each of our meetings and use the time while everyone is signing on to chat with them about their day.

Do you have a super awesome success story from 2020?

Last March was a very scary time for all of us. There was so much that was unknown about the Covid19 virus and there was the upheaval in our regular school schedule. In the midst of all of that uncertainty and fear there was a bright spot for me. I was able to reach out to not only my students, but students throughout our school and gather submissions for our very first virtual art exhibit here at IHS. The students were excited to showcase their talent and hard work. The show also provided an outlet for their creativity and way of coming together with others while remaining socially distanced at home. Putting the show together and publishing it was a labor of love and a great way to focus my thoughts on something positive during such a frightening time.

What do you do to encourage online classroom participation?

Communication is key when introducing students to a new learning format and encouraging their participation. I encourage and motivate my students by clearly communicating my expectations regarding their participation in our virtual Teams meetings. I also employ a consistent schedule with regards to the meeting dates and times and offer extra credit for regular attendance and participation.

Parent Communication... What's working for your families?

Open communication between parents and teachers is one of the keys to success. It also helps to avoid unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding. From day one, I provide my parents with my school email, planning period times, and my direct classroom phone extension. I communicate this information via my course syllabus which I send home with the students and post on Schoology. I also publish a parent information and support folder on Schoology which contains helpful resources that encourage parents to take an active role in their child's education and to monitor their progress in my class. At mid-term, I send home grade reports that require a parent signature, as well as call parents if a situation arises that requires their immediate attention. I also communicate with parents via email and Schoology messages.

What methods have been effective in teaching during a pandemic?

Teaching and attending school during a pandemic is a new experience for not only teachers, but also students and parents. Everyone involved in the public education system has had to adapt quickly, be flexible, and boldly move forward into uncharted waters with regards to designing meaningful lessons and experiences in this new blended format for instruction that incorporates both in-person and virtual learning. With that being said, I have found that there are several components that are essential for being an effective educator during these difficult times. Grace for everyone involved in the process is an absolute must. Everyone is struggling in one way or another and a bit of grace goes a long way to encourage and uplift others. Also organization and consistency are of great importance when structuring the learning environment and providing support for students. Constant communication between teachers, students, and parents is a key component for success, as well as establishing clear expectations and setting limits and deadlines. A large part of being successful is tied to being both accountable and responsible whether you're a teacher, parent, or student.

Share something positive about teaching in 2020.

Teaching in 2020/2021 has shown me that I am more adaptable than I thought. After teaching for 25 years, it is easy to become mired down in habit and tradition. That is not to say that tried and true teaching methods have no value, they most certainly do, but it is sometimes a good thing to be forced outside of one's comfort zone. Teaching during a pandemic on both blended and full remote schedules is a challenge to say the least, but having to adapt to the changing needs of my students and the ever evolving teaching/learning environment has caused me to be more creative and inventive in the way I construct lessons, teach important concepts, and structure projects. It has also opened my eyes to new teaching resources and programs that I wasn't aware of or utilizing before.