

Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus: A Conversation with a Physics Teacher at Escondido High School

In this blog series, our Vice President of Programs, Jeff Rozelle, is talking with teachers around the country about their lives during this pandemic. They'll talk about what teaching entails in this new world, how their students are managing, and the unexpected challenges and successes they find. This interview was conducted on April 8, 2020 and has been edited for clarity and length. Click [here](#) to see the other interviews in this series.

Brenda Minjares teaches regular physics and Advanced Placement physics at Escondido High School in Escondido, California. This is Brenda's sixth year of teaching, all at Escondido High, where she is the professional learning community (PLC) lead for Physics. Brenda is a Knowles Senior Fellow.

Jeff: What's going on at your school right now?

Brenda: This week is officially spring break, and distance learning is scheduled to start next Tuesday, April 14. Last week was intended for our PLC meetings, so we can decide what we are going to be doing starting April 14. Schools have been closed since March 13.

What have the last few weeks looked like for you?

Each day is different. Over the last few days, there's been a lot of acceptance sinking in, now that we are going into the fourth week of school being closed, the fourth week of quarantining, staying at home and social distancing. I've been struggling to figure out what it means to be working right now; I'm not used to doing it from home. I've actually tried really hard for the last few years to not work from home. So it's been challenging to navigate where my energy goes and how it gets expressed as a teacher.

And a lot of grieving. A lot of grieving. A lot of talking to teacher friends and confirming that these feelings and thoughts that I am experiencing are valid. I find a lot of validation from them in hearing that I'm not alone in worrying about issues of equity or how I can't even get myself to open up to the idea of doing a videoconference with my students yet. It just seems like it would be too real.

So most days, I focus on taking care of myself because I understand that I have to put my oxygen mask on first, so to speak, before I can help anyone else. I've been

trying to find a routine of self-care where I wake up, I meditate, I set a few intentions for the day, I check in with how I am feeling, and I check in with friends. And only then can I decide what I want to process work-wise.

I definitely didn't expect it to go this way. On Friday, March 13th, a bunch of teachers were meeting and hearing that schools were probably going to be closed, and we were saying "Oh, I'm going to get so many of my summer projects done in the next few weeks!" It wasn't long before we realized that wasn't a realistic expectation, and that hasn't been the case at all.

When you talk about grieving, what are you grieving?

I'm grieving the experiences that I thought we were going to have. I'm grieving the expectations that I had for how the year was going to go. We were planning a Socratic seminar for next week and that was something new and exciting. I'm grieving the professional development that I was going to be a part of for the next few weeks. I'm part of the equity team at my site and we were just getting ready to launch into a five-week inquiry cycle where we were going to collect data on how academic discourse impacts student performance and engagement. And I'm grieving the joy I get from my profession that comes from, I'm realizing now, the physical presence and social interactions in person. And I'm not going to get that for the foreseeable future. And even driving into work! I realized this year that a lot of my best ideas for my instruction happen while I'm commuting to work, and I have to let go of that experience. Each day I kind of realize a different thing. More recently, it just came to me—I don't know why it took so long—but only last week, I realized we weren't going to have a graduation, and I wasn't going to hear in person about where my seniors were going to go to college. A lot of these realizations have come throughout the weeks, and so I get angry, and then I try to feel those emotions and process them because I realize the sooner I do that the sooner I can move into acceptance and then focus on what I need to do to serve students.

You said your PLCs were planning. What were those conversations like and what did you decide if anything?

We started with a PLC lead meeting on Monday, which was the first work meeting I had since school had closed. It was two weeks of just limbo, which is literally what I wrote in my planner. "Cancel everything. Limbo."

There was a taste of business as usual, and it felt unfamiliar to me after two weeks of being in limbo. The meeting did start with our principal making clarifications and answering questions about the memorandum of understanding (MOU) that our union negotiated with the district. I was in such denial that we would go into remote learning because it was just so different, so much change, and, for me personally, a lot of shock.

But the meeting was also like most of our other PLC meetings with a lot of the same language from the PLC model. Make sure you are focusing on what you want students to learn. How are you going to know they learned it? What are you going to do if they didn't learn it? What are you going to do if they did learn it? Those four critical questions of a PLC, and once I heard that, things started to fall into place again. I can see how this will work. I'm a big believer in PLCs, and I know they are the answer, and here they are showing a little bit of light and a little bit of hope. I can use that as a compass to guide me.

Once that idea settled in, I scheduled a Zoom meeting with my fellow physics teachers and I made an agenda that was not dissimilar to what an agenda looked like before. We had a check-in. We brainstormed a scope of topics for the next few weeks, and selected which of our old activities we were still interested in pursuing. Which essential standards should we focus on? And then I always end with next steps and wonderings, and I realized in the meeting that I'm taking notes just like I usually do and it felt familiar. I heard myself speaking to them the same way I would speak to them in in-person meetings. I heard myself being a PLC lead again and that made things easier. It felt comfortable and it felt familiar. We still haven't decided everything yet, because a lot of us felt like we weren't in a place to make decisions yet. At the end of the meeting, the check out question was "What are you going to do to take care of yourself?" It just seemed super important right now. And thankfully, that's been a message we have been receiving from the union and our administration. "Just take care of yourselves first, this is unknown, unfamiliar territory. Unprecedented times."

But I do roll my eyes every time I hear that phrase, "In these uncertain times. In these unprecedented times." So that's the anger in me, still. There's still a lot of anger in me, and I'm not really accepting yet.

Did you get a sense of how your colleagues were doing?

I have faceted with them, but not to talk about work. I've tried to check in with a few of them on a regular basis. I work closely with two first-year teachers, so I have a lot of empathy for them. They are both handling it differently but they are generally OK. I do worry about them, but the most important thing that I stress to them is to do whatever feels right, whatever it takes to take care of themselves.

I think accountability is going to be hard, for myself and for others. I think giving grace is going to be very important for everyone, so I'm nervous about how to manage expectations, or whether to have any at all.

How are your students doing?

That's a good question. As I mentioned, I have avoided videoconferencing because it would make it too real for me. But I have posted check in questions on my Google Classroom to which I have maybe 10-15% of my students engage. My students' responses to those check-ins have really ranged, and I have heard that from other teachers too. Some students are really enjoying not being in school and are having a great stress-free time. Other students are feeling very frustrated and lost and scared. And I had a handful of students, all Advanced Placement students who emailed me directly to tell me how they were doing, to ask about work, or if they needed a letter of rec that is due at the end of the week. So they have checked in for those reasons. But generally I have the sense that it varies depending on the student. But that's as much as I know. I really hope I'm able to find out more soon.