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LOCAL

Q&A: Teacher, author Larry Ferlazzo on California school closures, remote learning

By Jill Tucker

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Leanne Francis, first grade teacher at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, conducts an online class from her living room on March 20, 2020 in San Francisco, California. With schools closed across the United States due to the COVID19 pandemic, teachers are holding some classes for students online.

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Teacher Larry Ferlazzo often gives advice and guidance to his fellow educators, helping them navigate the best ways to teach English learners, or how to use the latest technology, or how to motivate students and/or parents. Like most teachers, the Sacramento high school educator now finds himself in uncharted waters, working to find the best way to teach amid what could be year-ending closures of schools.

Ferlazzo, a teacher at Luther Burbank High School and author or editor of 12 books on education, took a few minutes Monday to offer some insight into what it's like to be a teacher during coronavirus closures.

It's been a crazy few weeks already. Does it feel like teachers and students are starting to settle into a new normal?

It's probably safe to say that the only place that might be happening now is in some countries in Asia, where they're into their third month of distance learning. Here in the U.S., the schools that began this the earliest might be entering their third week, while the vast majority are either in their first or second weeks or won't even start until Apr. 13. I can't even begin to think if — or when — any teachers or students are going to “settle” into distance learning here in the U.S. as the “new normal.”

What has been the hardest part of this for teachers in general?

In talking to educators around the country, which I do as part of my teacher's blog and my Education Week teacher advice column, the suddenness and lack of time to prepare has thrown us all for a loop. Of course, the same can be said for every single person about their whole lives! This, of course, is new for districts, too, so many of us are trying to figure out on our own what will work best for our students.

Learning loss is of course a big issue, but what would be your recommendation to parents concerned about this?

It's an issue we should all be concerned about. Research clearly finds that summer learning loss (the "summer slide") absenteeism, and family financial stress all negatively impact student learning. Research is equally clear that distance learning is unlikely to make up for it.

The best thing that parents can do right now is support and encourage their child to participate in the learning their schools are offering, try to keep them on some kind of schedule where they are doing the assigned academic work, and make a regular place where they can do it. They can ask their children questions each day about what they are learning.

Finally, if there is additional money in another federal stimulus package for schools, it is very possible that schools might offer an expanded summer school, increase school days next year, or offer extra tutoring. Parents can encourage their children to participate in those additional resources. One silver lining, though, is that, thankfully, schools have closed only after over 70% of the school year was already completed, so the situation could have been far, far worse.

What do you miss most about the classroom experience?

Talking, seeing, interacting, and joking with students is probably what most teachers miss, and I'm no exception. Most of us get into this business because we like students, and get energized by being around them. Texting and videoconferencing is something, but it's doesn't approach the joy of in-person contact.

Can you describe what your teaching day is like now?

It's a bit hectic. Our district is not officially beginning distance learning until Apr. 13, but many of us have already begun on our own. Several of my classes are in the midst of preparing oral presentations, so I'm giving written detailed feedback on all their outlines and regularly exchanging clarifying texts with many of them. Those presentations are going to happen in video conference later this month.

What are the biggest concerns your students have right now?

Financial stress is clearly on their mind. Many parents have lost jobs. At our weekly video conference check-in, everybody said they were bored and wanted to get back to school. Every time our district or the governor makes an announcement about a different date for the length of our school's closure, I'm bombarded by texts from students asking me if it's true - will we really be going back before June?

Do you see any bright spots in this whole thing?

It's unlikely you're going to find someone who's more of a "glass is half full" kind of person than me, but I see very little upside to school closures and massive unemployment. Perhaps the only bright spot is that the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who hype tech as the solution to all things that ail education will be seen as the powerless Wizards of Oz who they are, and people will realize that nothing beats face-to-face teaching and learning.

What do you tell other teachers who are new to all of this online learning?

Show grace to yourselves, your colleagues and your students. Keep things simple. Figure out what you want to teach, and then cut it at least in half. Don't give letter grades. Instead, give lots and lots of feedback. Lead with love, not with lessons.

What will you miss most during the closure?

I think one-on-one conversations with students is where the best teaching and learning can happen, with a paper or text in front of us both. Magic can happen then, especially if you have a good student/teacher relationship. It isn't the same over the phone or on a video call. I'll miss that magic.

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