

A Teacher's Changing Role During COVID-19

**Story by: Jessica Severson
Eau Claire, WI**

My current role is 100 percent teaching in a virtual environment to 40 third-grade students in the Eau Claire Area School District. I did not have much time or training to prepare to work in a COVID environment. At the end of summer on the Friday before school was to start on Monday, I was notified my role would be changing from a Reading Intervention Teacher—my role in the spring during shutdown—to a first-grade virtual teacher. The first week of school was a whirlwind attending training and meetings to prepare us for how to teach and meet the needs of 40 students in a virtual environment. On Thursday (Day 4 of planning), student needs changed, and I moved from teaching first grade to third grade. Thankfully, I was able to stay in my building, though other colleagues were not as fortunate. Not only were they teaching in different positions or grade levels, but they were also required to change buildings. Since those crazy and hectic first two months, I have developed a rhythm and learned how to manage as I go. It has been a daily learning experience with a steep learning curve. As a teacher I am committed to students and am resilient, persistent, and a problem solver.

A moment of joy I had with teaching was having the opportunity to work one-on-one with a student. School has always been a struggle for him. He is now at home due to health concerns. His mom is so supportive and helpful with his virtual learning. I have been able to develop a great working relationship with both my student and his mom. This year he has achieved more learning than his mom and his Special Education teacher have ever seen from him in all his years of school. With the right environment and the right support, he has been thriving in virtual learning.

October was by far the most challenging month of the school year. I was working 12- to 14-hour days. I felt like I was inadequately meeting student needs. I have 40 students learning virtually in my third-grade classroom. The learning curve of teaching myself how to virtually teach happened so fast. The technology performed inconsistently. I problem solved and learned how to teach eight-year-old children how to access their learning.

The most difficult aspects of my job have been meeting the various needs of so many students. It is challenging to develop relationships and face-to-face connections in a virtual environment. It is challenging to work in small groups on a regular basis. Some students struggle with attending virtual school. The technology issues are a huge barrier that I have had to problem solve and work through daily.

Recently I came to school, and my computer was not working. I was not able to restart or connect with my students for class starting in 30 minutes. The following is a small clip of my day I shared to social media:

What is a virtual teacher's nightmare? Coming into school to find your computer completely unresponsive. Will not turn on. Will not restart. Nothing. 🤖

Thank goodness for people willing to share their laptops with a moment's notice. ❤️



Thank goodness for friends & coworkers who listen to you panic and who try to help problem solve over the phone. ❤️

Thank goodness for sweet third-grade students who say, “It’s okay, Mrs. Severson. We know it’s not your fault!” and get started working independently. ❤️

Thank goodness for a supportive text from a parent who is listening to you teach, fumbling with tech issues while sweating and generally being a hot mess, when you are supposed to be teaching their child virtually.

Thank goodness for IT-411, who got me up and running relatively quickly and yet not fast enough. ❤️

This screenshot perfectly sums up things in the virtual world. “It’s taking a bit longer than expected, but we’ll get there as fast as we can.” As with everything with my life lately, practicing gratitude helped after the fact when I could breathe and stop sweating.

The most rewarding part of virtual teaching has been and always will be my students. My students have been incredibly resilient and flexible throughout the whole pandemic. Almost everything in their little lives has changed overnight. When school started in the fall, in-person students were so happy to be back in the building even though it looked and sounded nothing like how it has been. They are wearing masks without a second thought. They are happy to be here no matter what, for the most part.

My virtual students had an even bigger learning curve on how school was going to be now and how we were going to work and learn together. One thing that was always consistent was their kindness and compassion for one another. They worked hard to learn how to do school virtually with smiles on their faces and understanding when something was different or changing.

To decompress from a long workday, I find it best if I get outside for a walk, exercise, meditate, or read a book. Downtime is very important. I have had to set firm limits for not checking emails too often at nights or on the weekends. I had to make designated time to work and set limits. Otherwise, I could be working all night plus weekends to try to get lesson planning, lesson development, and grading done to begin to try to meet the needs of so many students.

I find strength and support from others. Virtual teaching is very isolating, and I am a people person. I have learned to set up virtual meetings to connect with and collaborate with my colleagues on a regular basis. I have learned that kindness and compassion with others go a long way. Everyone is struggling on different levels and on different days. Lean on each other to support and lift each other up.

Almost everything about the events of 2020 have affected my approach to work. Overnight, nothing about my job in education felt like it was the same. All my coworkers were transferred to different jobs, positions, or different buildings to meet the needs of our district’s students. I was left alone to figure things out. Virtual teaching (and quarantining) has been so isolating and one of the hardest things for me to learn to overcome.

I have always valued creating relationships with students, but I value it even more now. Relationship building is essential to student learning. Learning via technology makes that even more challenging. Much more thought and effort need to be put into creating relationships that typically happen in a classroom by chance conversations. I miss seeing smiles face-to-face, being able to work with small groups, teaching reading skills in person, and hugs from students who need and want them.

My greatest fear outside of work is that this virus and pandemic will forever change our world, and we won't be able to go back to any form of the way our world was before. I know many good things have come out of the pandemic, such as slowing down and appreciating the little things. One thing I have grown weary of is the fear of myself or my loved ones getting sick and dying.

Focusing on my breath and being outside—especially in the sun—and practicing daily meditation helps with stress and chaos. I also focus on controlling what I can control with my nutrition and exercise, as both of those things help me to handle the chaos better.

My advice to myself is to make time to spend with people. Enjoy more quiet days. Get outside. You are stronger than you think. You can get through a lot.

Getting me through this time are my friends, family and holding out hope that we are doing the best we can to get this virus under control so we can begin to try transition back to normalcy as soon as possible.

Artist Adia Higbie
Menomonie, WI

Adia Higbie is a junior at Menomonie High School. Adia is passionate about visual arts and dance and has her own resin jewelry business.

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).