

## March 2020-about 2pm - Warren County, NJ

I'm teaching a small group lesson at the back of my fourth grade inclusive classroom when the loudspeaker announces "All Staff please report to the STEAM Lab for an emergency meeting at 3:10pm."

I shrug and get back to work. A few curious students ask what the emergency meeting is about. I shrug and tell them I have no idea. "Focus on your work." I say.

### 3:10pm Emergency Meeting-Warren County, NJ

The staff is informed that a virus known as COVID 19 is rapidly spreading and we must be prepared to close at a moment's notice. We are instructed to work with our grade level teams to plan and compile two weeks worth of work for students to complete at home in the event that we close. Alarm spreads throughout the room. Brows furrow. Hands shoot up to voice questions and express concerns.

I sit smugly and think to myself, *"This is a lot of extra work for nothing. They will NEVER shut down schools. How will parents go to work? How will students learn? How will students socialize? This will NEVER happen."*

### Friday, March 13, 2020

I was very wrong.... so, so, very, very wrong! An emergency day is called for students. Teachers and staff are to report to their respective buildings and plan for a two week closure. We work frantically like a hive of honeybees and prepare approximately two weeks of work for students to complete from home. For elementary teachers, that means planning, reading, writing, math, science and social studies activities. Lesson plans are haphazardly written, hundreds of copies are made, websites are updated, online subscriptions are purchased, and emotions run VERY high.

### March 16th -June 16, 2020

March 16, 2020 marks the first day of at home learning that I was CERTAIN would not happen. I have no idea what my students are doing or how to check that they're doing their work other than checking the ReadWorks.org assignments page and checking Google Classroom. A few days go by like this. It's unnerving and definitely not teaching by any stretch of the imagination.

Time passes. We are informed at a virtual team meeting that we will be able to use Google Meets to connect with our students daily. I'm overjoyed and simultaneously extremely nervous. Some

words are thrown around the meeting: Zoom, Meet, Loom, Jamboard, Screencast. I smile and nod dumbly. *Mental note: Google all of these words after the meeting.*

When I was in grad school Google Meets was called Google Hangouts. I haven't set one up since 2015. I feel like a dinosaur. How am I supposed to teach a group of students -with IEPs-no less-on my seven year old laptop, using technology I've never been trained in and never even HEARD of!?

I panic. I'm a do-er and the only way I know how to feel better is to try out some of this technology. I call one of the parents of my students and ask to set up a Google Meet so we can work on reading. She's overjoyed and tells her son. This is my first ever Google Meet with a student. It's a disaster. The student can't login. Mom and I text back and forth:

"Not working." She types

"Is your mic on?" I ask lamely. Mic is the only thing I know.

"Yes."

"Says, *system error*. This is frustrating. I thought you said you would work with him?" She texts accusingly.

"Sorry, very frustrating." I text. I start sweating through my t-shirt and continue texting possible solutions:

"Mic?" I ask again.

"No, I already checked that, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Camera?"

"No."

"Settings?"

"No. Is there someone else you can ask?"

"I'm home with my 5 and 6 year old. I doubt they know." I text with a laughing emoji, trying to make light of the situation.

Crickets.

"Did you check the volume?" I text. By now, I'm totally defeated. I want to hide in bed with my blankie. This is what I get for being impulsive.

I know next to nothing about computers and don't let my own children go near them. My husband is convinced that screens are the root of all evil. But hey this is the lot I've been handed and I'm giving it the ol' college try.

Eventually, we give up on Google Meets and just to a Zoom meeting using her personal email and my personal email. It's great to see my student but I can tell that he's disappointed that it's just me. He misses his friends and I totally empathize.

*Mental note: Master this technolgoey and conduct small group Google Meets multiple times-daily. Kids need to see each other.*

The two week closure that I was sure would never happen, extends for the remainder of the school year. My coteacher and I come up with a decent plan and teach virtually using Google Meets (I

no longer call it Hangouts) Loom videos, Google Classroom, and LOT AND LOTS OF PHONE CALLS. Our phone numbers are in our students' contact lists and we receive questions at all hours of the day/night. In short-we are doing the best we can with the resources we have. Emergency teaching and good teaching are two very different things.

My principal informs us at a team meeting at the end of the year that virtual teaching will most likely continue into the next school year. I exit the meeting and cry. When will this end?

### **August 2020-Present Day**

After many summer task force meetings, school reopening plans are finalized. My children will be going to school for two half days a week while my students are attending school five half days a week. My lunch and prep have been shortened and my student contact time has increased by two hours. I have two cohorts (groups of students who only see each other)-an AM and a PM that are a blend of fully virtual students and in person students. In other words, I teach kids who are in school while also teaching to a group of kids in front of a computer. It's surreal to say the least. Each day, I come home from work completely exhausted and defeated. "This isn't sustainable." I think everyday.

Childcare is an absolute nightmare. Every day, my husband and I scramble to find someone to watch our two children. Then the fun really begins when I try to explain their virtual schedule:

"OK! Abby has Google Meets at 9:30, 11:30, 1pm and 2:30 pm. Here are her logins for Think Central, Google, Lexia, SeeSaw, and IXL." I pause and take a breath.

"William's kindergarten Meets are at 9, 9:30, 12:05, and 1:45. Here is a list of his logins for the Chromebook, Lexia, ABC mouse, SeeSaw and Think Central." I stop and look at my baby boomer mom.

She's staring at me like I have three heads...

"What language are you speaking right now?" She laughs.

So it goes. Days turn into months and we get into a *pretty OK* routine. My husband and I arrange for part time childcare every day until December when he is able to stay home full time with the kids. November rolls around and there are too many COVID cases in the county so my children are no longer going to school at all and are completely virtual. They miss their friends so much. Their teachers send home notices about "Virtual Crazy Sock Day!" Where the students wear crazy socks to their virtual meets.

My daughter is overjoyed, "We get to wear crazy socks! My teacher is the best!" She croons.

I want to cry. Since when is wearing crazy socks in front of a computer screen considered a great time? What has become of childhood? You can LITERALLY do that everyday and no one would even know!

I'm becoming cynical, I know. At least the kids are happy...and healthy.

## The Bright Side

Remember in March when I had to Google the names of all those apps? Well, I can honestly say that I'm using all of that technology and more. I am 100% self taught and amazed every day how adaptable humans are.

I never thought I'd be teaching a group of students through a screen. During every lesson I have at least three windows open: one so I can see the kids in the Google Meet, one so I can model whatever we are doing and one digital copy of whatever book we are using. When this all began, I didn't even know how to open more than one window on my computer, let alone use any of the apps. My principal recently bought me an XP pen, which I installed and started using the next day. I didn't know what it was but I figured it out. I guess I'm a tech genius now.

Having said that, I pray every day that this way of learning isn't really "The new normal." Kids may complain about school but this experience has made them realize that it's really not *all bad*. They miss playing with their friends outside at recess. They miss eating together in the cafeteria. They miss music class when they could sing and not be fearful of spreading a deadly disease. They miss working in cooperative groups. They long for the days when high-fiving wasn't considered a life threatening gesture.

Things are looking brighter, despite rising cases all around the world. A vaccine has been approved and teachers will be among the first eligible to receive it. I'm hopeful that this time next year, my children and students will be hugging Santa, singing carols together in the classroom, and wearing their crazy socks to school rather than a Google Meet so that their classmates can actually see them. Begone COVID! Return to the insidious hole from which you came.