Alone Together: A Special Education Teacher’s Perspective During COVID-19

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers felt alone and in need of support. As someone who had to embark on this virtual education journey, I understand.

In response to what we thought was a need to connect educators who support students with special needs, students, alumni, and faculty at the Loyola University of Chicago created the Special Needs Network for Educators (SNNE). The goal of this online community is to connect educators who support students with special needs to each other. Our community includes current and pre-service teachers alike. All are welcome!

One of the recent events for SNNE was an interview with secondary special education teacher Steve Rish who works at New Trier High School in Illinois. In the interview, Steve talks about challenges and successes for supporting students with special needs. He also shares more about the online supports he would like to maintain when schools reopen.
There were several parts of the interview that we wanted to highlight for this online community. Special thanks to Ellie Beach, a teacher education student at the Loyola University of Chicago, for her support in the development of this transcript.

**What does a typical day look like for you right now during the pandemic?**

“...I just got out of my resource seminar class, which is where I actually work with students pretty much one on one to address their...needs. In some cases, that could be everything from helping a student summarize an article about World War II who has to write a paper for next week, to one [student] who just needed a push. He’s got an emotional disability and was just super unmotivated and struggling this time of year in terms of managing his efforts and his motivation and I just kept him going, to a kid who struggles with simply completing homework...I check with him every few
minutes to make sure that he’s still doing something or working. And then there are a few kids who I can call to just do a brief check-in and [see] if they’re on track; they know what they need.”

How do you find it easiest to connect to students during remote learning?

“We have a learning management system called Canvas. With that, I can check on them (the students). Their teachers have shared their grades and assignments with me, and I am considered an observer. What I do is I go in before class to check and see if anybody is missing any work. To check with them one-on-one, I can Zoom. I create a breakout room and then I put each of them in a separate breakout room. I go over and say, “Ok, it sounds like you’ve got these things done in this class, you’re all caught up in this class, you’re missing a couple of assignments here.” Just want to make sure that’s on their radar. They get started and if they need any help with that, I come to their breakout room to help them with those things.”
So what would you say are some of your biggest challenges right now during remote teaching?

“I think the hardest challenge right now is [that] teaching is such a personal thing, right? It’s about relationships, and I think we’ve got the relationship established from when we were in school. I think the challenge right now is being able to have that time and space to help them, and it’s hard to do that remotely.

It’s hard to balance. I’m in a breakout session with a kid who’s struggling right now and knowing that I’ve got six other kids waiting in another breakout room that needs help with summarizing their assignment.

Or [I have] one kid who’s just not doing any work while he’s waiting. So in a classroom, I can... manage that. I can say, “Hey Johnny, get back to work over there”, or “hey Sally, I’ll be right with you. I know you’ve got that essay and I’m just talking to Johnny over here; he’s having a tough day.” And just having that presence in the classroom I think is really nice and comforting. I’ve got one kid who’s missing twelve assignments and he’s out of the state right now, so it’s really hard online...It’s hard enough as a teacher in the classroom trying to do that, let alone when I can’t guarantee they’re going to even log in at all or accept the help.”

What is an important resource or strategy that you’re using during the pandemic?
“I feel like I’ve done a lot of reading on the side of social, emotional, mental health work. Just reading about how important it is to keep those connections going during this time has really reminded me to keep doing what I’m doing, even though it is tough sometimes and it’s frustrating sometimes…I just need those little reminders.”

**Is there anything from this remote learning experience that you want to bring back to your classroom?**

“One of the things that I found, at least for high schoolers, is the learning management system. Having it organized in a way that the kids can find what they need, has been a game-changer in our high school. We don’t require every teacher to use the learning resource system in the same way, so it can be tricky for students to navigate. This teacher puts the assignment on the board, this teacher puts it on the assignment section, this one puts it on the calendar. I think if we could continue with that, the process of being able to say, I can see everything they’ve got, they can see everything they’ve got. It really makes my job as a resource teacher beneficial. I think even as a classroom teacher and a coach. What I would like to do as a coach teacher (co-teacher) in a math class is to have all the materials online, accessible, and easy to find. I think that really helps with that executive functioning piece, which is something I really focus on with kids and I’m finding that having that organization really makes a difference in person and digitally.”
Steve’s journey is similar to so many other teachers during the pandemic. We hope his insights provide you with comfort in knowing that we are in this together while we may be physically and socially distant. We wonder what has kept you going during this season of COVID, and what strategies you are using to provide support for yourself and your students. Please leave a comment below or share more with me by connecting on the SSWN.

Hank Bohanon is a professor at the Loyola University of Chicago. For more information about his work related to MTSS, see his website or his co-authored upcoming book about systematic interventions in secondary schools.
Also, if you are interested, we created our online community using a system called Mighty Networks. I would recommend checking out the School Social Work Network as another excellent example of using Mighty Networks to create a community around an important issue.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hank Bohanon

Dr. Hank Bohanon has been a special education teacher in the Dallas Public Schools. He also has served a project coordinator at the University of Kansas for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs research on positive behavior supports. He is a professor in School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago. There he founded and served as the director of the Center for School Evaluation, Intervention, and Training (CSEIT). He is a former member of the board of directors for the Association of Positive Behavior Support. His research includes three-tiered academic and behavior supports in urban and suburban settings. His current work focuses on supports for high school settings related to positive behavior support, response to intervention, social and emotional learning, and school mental health.

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