American Enterprise Institute

Web event — Virtual teaching during COVID-19: Report from the front

Welcome and opening remarks:
Katharine B. Stevens, Visiting Scholar, AEI

Panel discussion

Panelists:
Stephen Cilono, Eighth Grade Teacher, Lazear Charter Academy, Education for Change Public Schools
Margaret Goldberg, First Grade Teacher, Howard Elementary, Oakland Unified School District
Lani Mednick, Assistant Principal of Instruction, ASCEND, Education for Change Public Schools
Jasmin Tow, Assistant Principal, Aspire Monarch Academy, Aspire Public Schools

Moderator:
Katharine B. Stevens, Visiting Scholar, AEI

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Event page: https://www.aei.org/events/virtual-teaching-during-covid-19-report-from-the-front/

Katharine B. Stevens: I'm Katharine Stevens. I'm a scholar at AEI, and I'm delighted that you've joined us for our webinar today, "Virtual teaching during COVID-19: Report from the front."

I want to begin with a few facts on the current situation. As most people know, a huge number of children are still attending school remotely. According to the most recent estimates I've seen, there are about 30 million kids who are still online only. Another 11 million are in hybrid school, which is a combination of online and in-person. The majority of those are in-person only one or two days a week, and then 16 million kids who are attending school in-person full-time. Low-income, black, and Hispanic children in particular are overwhelmingly still attending remote or hybrid school. Roughly four out of five are online all or part-time.

There's a lot of evidence that this is having a hugely negative impact on children's learning. A large majority of parents believe their children are learning less in remote or hybrid school. A recent survey of elementary school principals shows that most schools don't have the resources they need. They believe — next slide please — that they believe they need to address the large learning losses that are occurring. People are increasingly worried about a drastically widening achievement gap.

There's a lot of discussion going on about what's happening to children, but the focus of today's webinar is to learn more about the experience and perspective of the hundreds of thousands of teachers who are currently teaching online. Roughly two million are teaching online only, and another 700,000 are teaching partly online.

We have four wonderful educators joining us today to share their experiences with teaching on Zoom for almost a year now. They're all working in the California Bay Area, in disadvantaged communities that are almost entirely Hispanic and are very low income. I've asked our panelists to tell us about what it's been like for them to teach on a screen, day after day; how has it affected them as teachers; and how do they see it affecting their students learning. They'll then share their views on what they're anticipating their students' needs will be when schools finally reopen and what they think needs to happen to make sure that all children get back on track.

The four educators who are joining us today are two teachers, Stephen Cilono, an eighth grade teacher, and Margaret Goldberg, a first grade teacher, and two assistant principals, Lani Mednick, an assistant principal in a K through grade eight school, and Jasmin Tow, an assistant principal in a K through grade 12 school.

To start us off, I'm going to show a few photos and a short video they've shared with me to give us a more concrete picture of what their day-to-day experience looks like, and then we'll hear directly from them. So, this is what two-plus million teachers see all day. This that you're seeing here now is one classroom that Lani is supervising. And here's another one.

These are a few photos of our panelists' current work setups. Here is Stephen's classroom, and another shot of Stephen's classroom. Here's Margaret's setup. This is a screenshot of Margaret teaching and Margaret's classroom rules. Finally, she gave me a short video, to give us a sense of what she does all day.

Margaret Goldberg: We distinguished, which means learning to tell the difference between what we learned from the illustration. Come off mute, guys. What does illustrations mean? Unmute. Illustrations are?

Children: Pictures.

Margaret Goldberg: Good, and what we learned from the text is? Shout it out.

Children: Words.

Margaret Goldberg: Words, yes. Thank you so much. Words, yeah. And they could be sentences, or they could be single words. You're absolutely right. Nice job. All right, so I can distinguish what I learned from the illustrations and what I learned from the text. In the book, what makes day and night to describe the pattern of light and dark on Earth?

My group had a big discussion, making sure we were all clear that the Earth is the thing that is moving. It's moving 1,000 miles per hour, and it's the sun that is staying still. One of the things that we talked about that was really helpful is that sometimes it can seem like something's happening, and it's not really happening. So, I gave this example, "It seems like my hand is growing." But my hand is not really growing; it's just getting closer. Sometimes something can seem a certain way, but it is not actually happening. The sun seems like it's moving, but it is not actually moving. It's the Earth that's moving.

All right, you are going to be able to share this in Seesaw by making a video, because you had a discussion in your breakout rooms. Your Seesaw assignment is just to click the video button and to answer the question: Why does the sun appear to move across the sky? You're going to be able to explain that it's not the sun that's moving; it appears or it seems like it's moving. It's actually the Earth that moves. We are going to do the work —

Katharine B. Stevens: That gives, I guess, a tiny snippet of an idea. Margaret, thank you so much for sharing that with us.

We're now going to turn to hearing from the four panelists. One of the conversations that I found myself having over the last several months with professional colleagues is, well, I think there's actually an official term for it, called "Zoom exhaustion." That people who are spending many hours a day in meetings, of course, with other grown-ups, who are usually behaving fairly well, but it's just exhausting to be on a screen all day, every day, as a way of interacting with people.

I would guess that that would be something that you guys would be experiencing, but I'm curious to hear about what it's been like for you to be teaching on a screen, what it feels like to you, how it's been affecting your teaching, how it's affecting your engagement with your kids, and how you're seeing it affecting your students.

So, why don't we start with Margaret? Margaret, if you just want to speak for a few minutes, to give us more of an initial sense of what this has been like for you. I guess, maybe nine or 10 months you've been teaching online now, is that right?

Margaret Goldberg: I started in August, and I think one of the things that happened was a typical exhaustion. Like, teaching is just tiring. And then you add Zoom on top of it, and it's extra exhausting. It's exhausting for the kids, too.

So, I think one of the things that I started to notice was that I had all sorts of teaching strategies that work in-person to try to correct students' behavior or to give them feedback, like getting close to a kid or having a whispered conversation or just putting your hand on a child's shoulder to give them some encouragement. I can't do any of those things. Basically, all of my teaching has to be verbal. Or maybe I can point to things on the screen, but I just feel like I'm cramped in some ways in my teaching style right now.

The other thing that I think I'm experiencing, which is probably similar regardless of the age, is that I'm competing with a lot of distractions. In a classroom, I have control of the setup, but when I'm teaching via Zoom, I can be trying to teach a child to read while she has her dog on her lap and she's feeding it bacon. I can't be trying to have kids — I read something off of the screen, but they have something else in their hands or there's a TV on or there's other sounds that are in the space.

I think it's always a delicate balance of knowing like, when are things happening that I should actually ask them to stop doing or to fix, so that they're able to focus on their learning, and when is that disrespectful because it is their home and I'm a guest in their home as a teacher via the computer? So, I feel like it's always this delicate balance of knowing what to say something, about how to say it, and how to make sure that they understand that my expectation is engagement even though it's really hard for them right now.

Katharine B. Stevens: Stephen, does that sound like what it's like for you?

Stephen Cilono: Yeah. Yeah, I would echo everything that Margaret said. Yeah, and I think one of the things I've struggled with is they're in their home environment or on their computer, and just convincing them that you are in fact, in school. This is school. You know, I'll have, oftentimes all kids step away, and bless them, they're doing their best and they're helping out with the family. But they'll be like, "I'm going to go have breakfast now," and I'm like, "Actually, if you can come back, I'm about to deliver a lesson." And, you know, I mean, I don't know how I would handle this situation when I was — well, I do know how I would have handled it at 13, and it wouldn't have been pretty, so. But it's just convincing them that this is school, this is real.

You know, we are not coming back anytime soon, unfortunately. And I think that's been one of the things I've been fighting since I've been doing this since March — is people thought we'd be coming back in August, people thought we'd be coming back in November, people thought we'd coming back January 1. I think they were waiting for that date to — many of the students have thrived in this situation. That's another story. But many of them were waiting for that date to, "Okay, I'll turn it on then." Unfortunately, that date hasn't arrived.

But again, I'd echo everything Margaret said, especially the idea of competing for their attention. You know, I'm teaching in a world where screens are typically used, typically, for video games, for entertainment for the age group that I work with. And as entertaining as I think I can be, think I am in-person, on screen, it evidently doesn't translate, so that's been a real challenge for me.

Katharine B. Stevens: There's an article I was reading recently about the problems with remote learning. We'll put it in the comments. It's really a phenomenal article. Actually, I'll just say it right now. If our audience is interested, it's by Alec McGinnis. It came out in September, it's called "The students left behind by remote learning." A pretty extraordinary article. Anyway.

So, he was talking to a teacher, and the teacher said with the shift to remote instruction, he felt a loss of purpose. He said, "All the gratifying, purpose-driven reward benefits of being a teacher were stripped." At first he and his colleagues called to check up on the students who weren't logging in, but then he talks about just getting disconnected because what teaching had meant to him, which is those personal relationships, was something that just wasn't there. Stephen, can you talk about how that's been for you?

Stephen Cilono: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I was thinking about that last night, actually. And then I can hear my father's voice, "Well, if it was supposed to be fun, they'd call it a vacation." My dad was a child of the Depression, so he always has a tough and strict view on work. So it's always in the back of my head.

But work for me was fun. I'm not such a good person that I'm out there to save kids or to do this because I want to give back. In large part, I teach because I really enjoy doing it. I have a great time, really, every day with the kids. I like the challenge. I love working with the difficult classrooms. Those always end up being my favorite kids. But in this kind of environment, I feel like all those joys, many of those joys — that's an overstatement — many of the joys are stripped away.

Just that ability to have that one-on-one connection, as Margaret referred to, the ability to put your hand on a student's shoulder and say, "Hey, you can do this," and to see them respond to that. So those little interactions that I think help teachers get through difficult moments and challenging times aren't there. Again, that's why they call it work. So, I don't want to complain too much. There are tougher jobs to have, but that's been a real challenge for me, just as from a — maybe even from a lack of motivation standpoint.

Katharine B. Stevens: How many kids do have in your — you teach eighth grade, and these are gifted people who love and are good at teaching middle school. It's a gifted and a rare breed, in my observation. So, how many are in your eighth grade class now?

Stephen Cilono: There are 59 students. I have two tracks of kids, two classes of kids.

Katharine B. Stevens: You have 59 students that are in little squares on your zoom screen on a daily basis, in theory?

Stephen Cilono: In theory, yes.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, every single day you're interacting with 59 little squares on your screen? That's what's happening? What percentage of those kids are there at all, and what percentage have their videos on?

Stephen Cilono: It's gotten much better. At the beginning of the year, so in August, I would say that the percentage of kids who were consistently in attendance probably was about 85 percent, compared to what we typically see in our school, which is about 96 percent, on a

daily basis, in standard, normal school. The percentage of children with their cameras on, in the beginning of the school year, it was probably 50 percent. Right now, I would say with every additional time that I lose my temper about it, we've grown to probably about 90–95 percent.

Katharine B. Stevens: Wow.

Stephen Cilono: And I say lose my temper about it, but to be fair to them, I think we've grown together, we've developed relationships, and they have a sense of empathy for me too. Like, I've expressed to them it's very difficult to speak to, you know, a group of blank screens. It's silence, you know, but blank is just too much, so.

Katharine B. Stevens: Wow. Margaret, what about you? How many little children's squares do you deal with, on a daily basis? And what percentage are showing up, and are there cameras on or not?

Margaret Goldberg: I have 25 kids in my class, and we have a variety of different sessions. So, we have small-group reading session. We have a whole class — class meeting, which is what you saw a little snippet of. We've got math.

There are some transitions, and with every transition, I'll lose some students, or some students will show up. So, over the course of the day, I see almost every child. There may be two kids that are not super likely to come on a given day. But overall, I see them. I just don't see them for all the instruction that they need and deserve. So they may come to class meeting, and then we won't see them again for math, for example.

When it comes to videos on and engaged, I've been really fortunate to have parents who are really supportive. I just send them a nonverbal message asking them to start their video, and they almost always do. Or an adult will quickly type like, "He'll have his video on soon. Sorry about this." So, I feel very grateful that the families are open to having that happen.

I also feel like sometimes I hear middle school teachers talk about like, "It's black boxes, and it's so demoralizing," and I'm like, "Yeah, and seeing 6-year-olds and what they're doing is also a little demoralizing." You know, they may be upside down on a couch, or they've got something in their hands. Or they're eating or walked away, or there's a dog or whatever it is. Like, I think I've gotten to the point now where I'm able to see like, they are engaging in the work, I am seeing growth. I am actually seeing academic progress, so I'm trying to allow my expectations for classroom behavior to settle into this new normal.

Katharine B. Stevens: I'm wondering if we could, Martha, if you're still there, if we could get back up on the screen one of those photos of the Zoom screen? Can you share your screen? I just want to give everyone, the audience, a few minutes to look at this. I mean, we first got the idea for this event, actually, in a conversation I was having with Margaret when it was just — I was just grasping that this is what teaching meant to her.

Now, these are young children. There's many fewer than 59. But you can just — if you look at this and the other, actually, Martha, can you go to another photo? You just see these kids doing — this is kindergarten. This is one of Lani's supervising class, and you can just see them, they're like, all over the place. I'm assuming that I was sent shots where most children were more or less visible.

Martha, can you go to the next one? So, Margaret is successfully getting this group of kids to respond, and there's the guy with a blanket over his head. You can probably see in the sort of — the lower left. In any case, this to me really kept just — before speaking to Margaret, I hadn't thoroughly grasped — thanks, Martha, I think that's good. I hadn't thoroughly grasped that this was what was going on with 30 million children and two-million-plus teachers. I think somehow when we're thinking about how this is affecting people, children and teachers, and we're thinking about how to put the pieces back together again, for us to fully understand what's been happening, is really important.

Let me turn to Lani and Jasmin and ask you guys to talk about what you're seeing more generally, around the questions I've been asking. Lani, do you want to start?

Lani Mednick: Sure. Yeah, this is not —

Katharine B. Stevens: Sorry for interrupting. Lani, just to remind you, she's an assistant principal of a K through eight school, right, Lani?

Lani Mednick: Yes. Yeah, and we even have some TKs, so some, like, preschool almost, students, that are on Zoom every day. And it's definitely not —

Katharine B. Stevens: I'm sorry to interrupt you again. So, how are you spending your days? I should have asked you this.

Lani Mednick: Oh, no, that's okay. So, I was just saying it's not ideal, not ideal for my day, not ideal for the kids, not ideal for teachers. My day is a range. We definitely have an all-hands-on-deck approach. So, I'm teaching some small groups every day. I'm in classrooms observing, giving feedback to teachers. I have three —

Katharine B. Stevens: Zoom classrooms, you're on Zoom classrooms?

Lani Mednick: Exactly. Zoom rooms. I have three first-year teachers that I'm supervising, so, like brand new, that I was able to support teaching them about, you know, being a first-year teacher, and supporting them in that. And then it's on Zoom, so it's this strange new world that we're all first-year teachers in. I have a lot of meetings with teachers, one-on-one, supporting them in that effort, and also with the other admin to create the conditions for this to be successful, or at least, somewhat successful.

I do a lot of thinking about the data. I'm thinking about, like, how to respond and be flexible in the moment, to all the many things that are happening every single day, with our students, with families, with teachers. There's power outages, where, you know, Ben's school is not accessible. It's almost like the building is locked on a rainy day. So, there's like a lot of responsiveness that I have to do in the moment and long-term planning.

As Stephen was saying, we don't know when we're coming back, so it's like building the plane while we're on it — feeling. And, you know, there's a lot at stake. These students and their education is at stake, so every day, I feel like I hold a lot of responsibility and just want to be present and supportive of all the needs that arise.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, when you're in these Zoom rooms, like we had a couple of photos of those, what's the range of — I mean, I know all of your teachers are, I'm sure, all trying as hard as they can, and you're doing everything you can to support them, but my guess is there's a range in people's ability to cope with this situation. What are you seeing in terms of that range when it's going pretty well? And then when it's not going well, what's happening?

Lani Mednick: Yeah, transitioning to this world of instruction was definitely a steep learning curve, in a lot of different ways. So, there's the technology piece. Some of our brand new teachers actually had that solid. They knew the technology better than some of our veteran teachers, right? And our veteran teachers, as Margaret was explaining, like, we have so many tools in our tool kit that we can't use right now. So, it's about like, what are new engagement strategies? How do we support our students getting access to the information and not feeling like, especially the younger kids, like just a passive purveyor of information? Like, this is not a TV show; you're in school.

Yeah, so there's quite a range, from teachers that don't necessarily have the skills technically or instructionally to, like, engage and push students, to a continuum of teachers that are doing amazingly well. Like, I am inspired every day when I come into some of these spaces around the community that they have created through little Zoom boxes, and the feeling that I have every time I'm in those spaces, it is inspiring.

So, yeah, there's definitely a range, and everyone is trying very, very hard. Like, there's nobody slacking here. Everybody is showing up every day and giving it their all, despite the circumstances that we're in.

Katharine B. Stevens: Jasmin, you're an assistant principal. I'm sorry, I've described your school incorrectly. It's a TK through five elementary school, right? So, how would you describe what is your day like? What do you do every day, and what are you seeing in your classrooms?

Jasmin Tow: I would say, you know, keeping a pulse of what's going on is different in virtual school than in-person, because I can't just walk up the hall. You know, we don't have the same mechanisms to see who's showing up late or leaving early, to what Margaret spoke about, about who's, you know, on camera for the full instructional day. We were fortunate to have many of our — pretty much nearly our entire teaching staff return from last school year to the school year, and so the relationships with, like, staff are there and relationships with teachers are there. You know, we have many students who have siblings, and families know our teachers. But the same identifiers we would use for kids aren't there.

And then a large need — I think what's become more visualized is the challenges that weren't as readily apparent before we were relegated to just technology. You know, we have several families who are not literate in English or Spanish. So, that's necessitated, you know — I think about pre-pandemic, how many paper flyers went home, and they went home in English, in Spanish, but we have families that I know couldn't read them. So, I, besides observing classrooms virtually, I have also done — I'm bilingual and literate in Spanish, and so I've also done tech support. I've taken family calls for teachers who don't speak or read Spanish.

Our teachers have tried, you know, the best they can with Google Translate and things like that, but we have two newcomers who came to our school from outside the US in January of 2020 and so had about a month of schooling before the pandemic. And so I was teaching those two kids because their teacher didn't necessarily know how to teach them fractions in Spanish. They're fifth graders.

So, I think we see a lot of things that are visualized that weren't, but then we're also missing, you know, a ton. I think about elementary school. We do vision and hearing screenings. We can't do that right now. We see, you know, being able to see a kid's physical assets and have those early identifiers of, you know, for nutrition, for needing a referral, for, we have several students pre-pandemic even, who had anxiety. You know, that's to be expected. You know, many kids when they start TK or K are scared to be in school and things like that, and I think that, the more longer we're in distance learning, that's the kind of thing that we expect to have ripple effects. You know, we expect to see third and fourth graders with anxiety about coming to school by the time we come back.

So, it's a lot. I think every day is different. I mean, I keep a calendar and keep a list of things I want to do, but there are many more, you know, unknowns and unpredictables like tech challenges, the teacher's internet goes out, a kid came to the Zoom late and the teacher is not seeing the waiting room, so the family is texting every teacher they know about can their kid get let in. This kid hasn't come to group. Oh, this entire family left the country, you know.

So, our ability to keep the pulse is largely dependent on our relationships with families, because we hear the information from them. We can't necessarily seek it out the same way we would or wouldn't notice if we were in the building.

Katharine B. Stevens: And Jasmin, how are you seeing this affecting the energy, motivation, morale of the teachers in your school?

Jasmin Tow: I think I'm so grateful to our teachers. Our teachers are working so hard and working so beautifully in partnership with our families. I think we've been given an impossible task, but it's hard for people to talk about that without laying blame. We can talk about a lot of places the blame should go. The blame should not go into folks in school buildings. I'll leave it at that.

So I think, you know, the fear, in education, when you look at what's the next goal — and urgency and this — this — this being able to cede control because we have to — I mean, we have to cede controls with the pandemic, while also keeping the motivation to keep going. It's challenging. To keep teaching when all the cameras are off or to keep trying to log on when the Zoom has gone out five times in the last half hour. I think that — I'm thinking about what Stephen said about as we've been waiting, like, "Oh, it's only going to be a month or two months," and, you know, people who are like, "We'll be back at Disney World in July of 2020." You know, we look back and laugh, but there's some healing that has to happen.

You know, I had a session with somebody that was really beautiful, that was about acknowledging the loss. It was about the end of last school year, so June of 2020, and acknowledging that everybody has lost something, whether it's seeing your child graduate or being able to connect with a loved one, and have to humanize our staff and our families while we try to do the best we can with what we got.

Katharine B. Stevens: Yeah. Stephen, what are your thoughts following up on what Jasmin just said? I mean, you said before about the motivation. A couple of things, one, are you in touch with colleagues, and what are your thoughts on there, your impression of what they're going through? Another question I have is: How long, Stephen, can you keep this up?

Stephen Cilono: I can keep it up indefinitely. You know, I can hang in there. I don't want to be overly dramatic and say I can only take it for a couple of more months. You know, it's difficult, but it's not undoable. Having said that, I mean, we're just not seeing the outcomes that we used to see, which is a whole other conversation.

But in a [inaudible], I think it's connected from a motivation. We spoke to motivation and how are my colleagues doing. I think we're all slowly but surely — or at least a certain segment of us like me, who are maybe struggling the most with tech and with the minutiae of distance learning — I think it has impacted outcomes so much that it's affected our sense of efficacy. For me, I think — and this has made me think about so much about why I teach. For me, that has been the biggest strain, the knowledge that I am just not making the difference that I used to make.

I'm proud to say that, because my kids are just absolutely amazing, we got exceptional results, relatively speaking, for the last several years. And I know those results won't be there. There's no getting around it. So, that has been difficult, from a motivation standpoint, and I think my peers are feeling the same thing.

I should add, I think there's a certain subset of teachers, younger teachers, some of the new teachers, who have never known anything different, have adapted to the tech. I think they're some of our best teachers right now, so kudos to them that the tables have turned. And so they might have a different perspective on motivation. They may bring a little bit more to the table every day and might be able to sustain this a little bit longer, or at least, sustain it happily.

Katharine B. Stevens: I mean, I guess it strikes me that the education of children is fundamentally about building human connections and trusting human connections. My own experience on Zoom is there's just a low ceiling on how those relationships, those human relationships can be built via screen.

One thing I'll be interested to see actually is the newer teachers who are doing very well on the screen, to what extent they'll do well when the sensuality of the human relationship is put back in the equation.

Stephen Cilono: That's a good question. And perhaps, you know — and I'm the old guy here in the room, you know — perhaps is that right now there's a younger generation that is more practiced and more adept at building relationships through the screen, through texting.

Katharine B. Stevens: Interesting.

Stephen Cilono: We'll see if that continues when we go back. I mean, time will come again, but for now, it's served them well.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, I just want to ask Margaret and then Lani to comment on the motivation question, and then I want to turn to what you're seeing with the families and the children that you're teaching. Margaret, what are your thoughts on this motivation issue? How it's affecting you, your observation about how it's affecting colleagues that you're in conversations with?

Margaret Goldberg: Well, I just got my midyear data back, and my kids learned. There's this part of me that's like, "Oh, my gosh, this is actually working better than we might have thought that it would work," and that I have kids who came in as nonreaders, and they are now reading. So, I feel really excited by that. I kept looking at the data, and I was like, "Really? Really? Really? Okay. Okay, this is good."

But I think there's a couple of things that are missing right now, that I can't get to them. They're not having like, the bulk of reading that they would normally do at midyear in first grade, they're not doing the amount of writing that they normally would do. They're not engaged in the amount of conversation, the academic discussion that they would do.

So, I think one of the things that feels a little bit sad to me is that the joy of the learning for the kids isn't as high as it ought to be. Like, they're not having that experience of, like, suddenly becoming literate and realizing that it's happening and being excited to show me a book from the classroom library that they can now read. Like, all of that stuff is not there. I think that that's one of the things that I thrive on as a teacher, is seeing kids come to this set of skills and surprise themselves with their abilities. That's not there.

I do think that when it comes to my own motivation, I'm in it for as long as we need to be in it. But one thing that I keep saying to people — and I'm like, "Don't hold me to it yet," but I really want to loop with these kids, because I want to fill in the gaps that they've experienced. I want to make sure that they're properly prepared to adjust to the next year, and I know right now they're not. I think we're not going to find out the effects of what's happening right now until kids are actually back in school buildings and we are trying to teach them and we're starting to notice what gaps there are in their learning, what strengths they're bringing. Because there are some things that we've been able to do really well in distance learning that have been a struggle in in-person learning.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, when you say loop with them, does that mean that you are their teacher again next year? Is that what you mean?

Margaret Goldberg: I think I want to. I mean, we'll figure that out. But I think one of the things that I hold in the back of my mind is next year's teacher is going to have to pick up the scraps that we've given them, right? So, they're going to have to look at the data. They're going to have to see what wasn't possible to cover in distance learning and what is going to have to happen in in-person learning.

Katharine B. Stevens: I want to come back to that. I think that's so enormously important, like something has to happen. We'll figure out what that's going to be on. But before we turn to that, Lani, could you say something about what you're seeing in terms of — I mean, this is obviously a struggle for you, as you've explained, trying to keep this together. How are you seeing it affecting your teachers, or the range that you're seeing?

Lani Mednick: Yeah, similarly, it goes up and down each day. Like, in days when you get data and you're seeing that students are making meaningful growth in reading, you feel excited and motivated. I've seen teachers like, "Wow, like, some of them are growing more, because I'm actually teaching my reading group every single day instead of like, sometimes in the classroom setting there are distractions that pull you away from that."

I'm also seeing the deep motivation of the family relationships that have been built that are, like, profoundly stronger in many cases than past years because of this, like, window into their home and the need to have parents and families on our team. It's not just a teacher teaching this year. It's like community effort. And so like, I totally get both for the academic piece that Margaret's sharing, like wanting to loop with their kids, but also the relationships.

Even though we have so much less time with kids, that's something I've been thinking about a lot. Like, our kindergarten kids are on a screen for about two hours, total. They do some other things, but engaging with the teacher, it's a third, at best, of the time that they're usually with a teacher, so that time alone makes it difficult. But the relationships outweigh that sometimes, with families. Teachers are constantly on the phone with parents or messaging through ParentSquare, DeansList, or all these other platforms that we're using to build a community of educators.

So, the motivation — I think teachers generally, as humans, are pretty intrinsically motivated. Like, we love our work in many ways and show up every day with that love and desire to support and to have fun with our kids, as Stephen was saying. We do it because we care. Teachers are bringing that same care every day, despite the struggles, but yeah, it definitely goes in waves. There's many coaching sessions, if you like, therapy sessions that I have where, you know, just listening, all ears, to the many emotions that are happening. We're in a global pandemic, so I think that's probably the same with almost every profession, but we're holding a lot as educators.

Katharine B. Stevens: It's also striking me that you and Jasmin are both principals of elementary schools. My guess is, I mean, Stephen, you're teaching middle school, which is — do you guys think that it's possible that this is harder? Is it harder with older kids, do you think, with middle and high school kids? Are you getting that sense with younger kids? What would you say are the differences and the challenges? Are you guys in conversations with — for anybody who wants to comment on this, are you in conversations with principals or teachers who are teaching older kids? How does it seem like that's going? I'm curious what [inaudible].

Lani Mednick: Yeah, so we have, like, a community of practice where all of our APZs, coaches, etc., come together to K–12. I think it's mixed. My brother-in-law is also a high school teacher that is back in — just started hybrid a week and a half ago. I think one challenge is the expectation isn't necessarily in secondary, that the family communications are strong. It's like, you're older, you can handle your schoolwork, take care of your responsibilities. And so maybe the, you know, the caseload of an upper grade teacher is not designed for you to be able to call your kids' families as often as you might in elementary, where you have somewhere in the 20 students.

So, like, to what Stephen was speaking about, having cameras hasn't really been an issue with us unless, I think with what Margaret said, like, there's something going on and they need to have the camera off this second. But it isn't an issue of like, "No, I just don't want to,

so I won't." You know, the parents are still the authority or decision maker, and our kids are too young — you know, separate exigent circumstances, they're too young to be left alone and unsupervised. So, I think there's benefits and drawbacks.

I think it'd be really challenging to try to reach out to, like, an 11th grader whose parents I don't really know and haven't, you know, I've said hello to you at dismissal or something, if I saw them, but haven't needed that relationship with to now be like, "Your kid is failing all of their classes," would be really challenging. So, I heard the engagement piece has been harder in our network, in secondary than it has been in elementary.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, I've heard that there are classes where there's pretty much — no one's quite camera on. It's just like, there's blank boxes with the names. Is that something you guys have heard?

Margaret Goldberg: Yeah, I mean, it's contagious. So like, once one kid has figured out that that's possible, then everyone has figured it out, and so I think that once, just like classroom behavior is contagious, right? You can walk into a classroom, and you can see things are all moving seemingly well, because that's the expectation. And then you can walk into another classroom, and that's not the case.

But I think one of the things that I hold on to — and I know it's really easy to be, like, longing for somebody else's situation — I think it is really hard in kindergarten and first grade because they don't know what school behavior means. Like, when I was hearing Stephen say, like, "You're in school right now," my kids actually don't know what that means. They were only in school for a few months, right?

I remember talking with one of my students, and he was like, "Yeah, when I was at my kindergarten school, there were chairs." And I was like, "Oh, and what's it like now?" And he was like, "Now I have a computer teacher." And I [inaudible]. I was like, you don't have the memory of what you're trying to re-create in the home, right? Like, I think kids who are older may have some understanding like, "I should probably have a chair. I should probably have a desk. I should probably sit up. I should probably do" — whether or not they do it, is a different story. But my kids don't really have the memory of school.

Katharine B. Stevens: Right, Stephen, what are your thoughts, as a middle school teacher? I don't know if you're also speaking to other teachers teaching middle and high school kids.

Stephen Cilono: I speak with my own team. I don't have a lot of contact outside my network. I mean, even, I speak with my middle school team, so I really can't compare and contrast the lower grades with the upper. As with normal school, I suspect there's positives and deltas to each, and we all perceive it in our different ways.

But I will add that, you know, I think one of the challenges this year — and especially as distance learning continues — is that middle schoolers are learning the power of "no." We had them for a little bit last year, but now, they realize that, you know, when you say turn on your camera, they can say no. It truly is optional.

When you're in your own classroom, you know, and the teacher says, "Pay attention," it's a little less optional to pay attention, you know, for the sociological reasons and pressures that

go along with that. But when you're at home, you know, it's a lot easier to just say no and mute yourself and turn off your camera. And so that's been an additional challenge.

Katharine B. Stevens: Mm-hmm. Well, I guess there's one other thing I wanted to ask you guys about, and that is something you've touched on. And that's engagement with the parents. You both talked about parents don't necessarily even speak English. Probably they're not all adept with technology. You guys have had to work with the parents to get the technology set up, is that right? Any of you guys want to comment on that?

Margaret Goldberg: Sure, when we started, I think it was about 70 percent of our families did not have the technology that they have now or the technology they needed to access their instructions. So, at the beginning, it was a lot of sanitizing laptops and gathering hot spots, and just giving it to families is not enough. As Jasmin was alluding to, like lots of tech calls and setting folks up with the technology. Like, what is Zoom? How do you use it? Here's a child schedule. Here's Clever, here's Zearn, here's Lexia. There's like all these platforms.

It was a huge lift at the beginning, to support our students even having access to the program that we have built or have, like, set up for our students. And then in the moment and every single day, it's very infrequent that I'm in a class and don't see a parent sitting next to a child, even if it's just like their arm, or I hear their voice when I'm trying to give an assessment. Giving students answers, that happens.

But yeah, it's very much working with an entire community. There's lots of times when parents will pop in and ask the teacher a question. I'm in the middle of a lesson. And, you know, a lot of our teachers have really appreciated that, in many ways, and it's also a vulnerable piece because no longer is a teacher just teaching to a classroom of students. They're teaching to their students and all the parents, and there's judgment, questions, criticisms that come out and overwhelming admiration, as well.

So yeah, it's quite the gamut, and it's really important to have these relationships built. And it's really important for parents to feel supported in their efforts at home, as well.

Katharine B. Stevens: Mm-hmm. Jasmin, do you want to add anything to that?

Jasmin Tow: Yeah, I would agree. And that was something interesting. I think there was a lot of momentum. I can speak about Oakland, but I would imagine nationally about getting tech in a kid's hands and, you know, solving a long-term problem with the tech gap, and to what Lani said, giving a computer to someone who does not know how to use it. And I'm talking about family members. Caregivers is not the answer. Screenshots were some of our best friends. You know, screenshots, and some of us took videos on our phones, like, have your partner or roommate hold your phone behind you and take a video of you using the computer. It was a huge, I think, lift.

And then, of course, there have been some risk. You know, sometimes the only way to fix the computer is for the family to bring it to school, and so we have to bring it to school, gear up, try to fix it outside, you know, weather permitting.

You know, being in students' homes, we try to be flexible and open. You know, for some students, some families have the space for students to be in a room working, but many of our students have siblings or live with cousins, and then, where do you go? And then there's a

catch-22. There are some kids who they have their own room. They're in their room, but they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing in their own room. And so it's the balance of like, what does supportive supervision look like in this situation, and should they be on headphones?

I think keeping the line of communication open and not overpromising, I think, has been really important. Because I think we, you know, we have some kids who come to virtual school every day. They're on Zoom every day, and they're still struggling. They don't know all their letters, or they're struggling to retain. And so bringing that concern to the caregiver in a supportive way, not in a, "You have done something wrong," because that would set them up to say, "Well, you have done something wrong." Because it's challenging. You know, if we're tired of being on Zoom, imagine, you know, how tired a 7-year-old is.

So, I think keeping the lines of communication open and showing respect for — I understand, like, if there's a lot of noise in the background, maybe that's where the kid has to be right now. Maybe it's noise in the background, or they're not on Zoom. We have a student — it's super cute. His mom works at a fast-food restaurant, and so you can see the logo in the background. I thought he had changed his Zoom background, and then I realized that he was at his mom's work. And I was like, you know, we appreciate your dedication and commitment to take him, you know. That's an additional risk to have him sit in the area, you know, the seating area of a fast-food restaurant and work on his computer so that he can join in.

So, I think having that respect and empathy and knowing that there's a lot of things we don't know have gone a long way to supporting families.

Katharine B. Stevens: Wow. And Lani, you just put in the chat that you guys actually have tech support every three hours a week to work with parents. Is that —

Lani Mednick: Yeah, I mean, a lot has to happen in the moment, but we do have three hours reserved every Wednesday, from 2:00 to 5:00, that parents can come and exchange computers or see what's happening when they can't access. Because sometimes, as we all know, technology is working for them, and then something happens. So, we have to be responsive to those needs. As Jasmin said, it has to happen in-person sometimes, because we can't see what's going on for them. There are so many little issues that could happen with technology.

Katharine B. Stevens: Right. And Stephen, how does this work for eighth graders? Like, who gets them set up? Are you interacting with parents at all?

Stephen Cilono: Physically, or?

Katharine B. Stevens: No, screen.

Stephen Cilono: Yeah, no. I mean, for me, this has been one of the positives that come out of the distance-learning experience. Perhaps this was a growth area for me, but I think this pertains to other teachers. This has really forced us to up our volume on parent communication.

So for me, in many ways — and I admittedly can have a tendency to become an island unto myself and to be a little closed off, and so this really forced me, you know, to reach out to parents on a daily basis for any number of reasons, whether it be from technology, to work completion, and to reach out to every parent, because every parent at one time has run into one of those needs. I actually feel closer to my parents in many ways than I ever have before. And so that's one of the things that once normalcy returns, such as that maybe, that's one of those things that I want to take with me and continue.

Katharine B. Stevens: Are you finding the parents to be responsive and cooperative?

Stephen Cilono: The parents are amazing. I mean, everybody is responsive and cooperative, according to their means or to the place that they're in. You know, it's a global pandemic that we have so many of our parents have lost their jobs, so sometimes schooling, which is hard to hear for some, is not their priority. You know, getting food on the table is our priority. And so that requires a whole other level of empathy and understanding on the part of teachers. But yeah, the parents have been amazing. They're incredibly supportive and communicative.

Katharine B. Stevens: You know, I feel like this is really, maybe the first real life silver lining that has struck me about this whole thing. My own background is in K–12. I worked with low-performing schools in New York City for 10 years, and parents certainly perceived schools as disengaged from them. And, Stephen, to your point, if there was some way to sustain this, to incorporate what's been learned from this, going forward, that would actually be a big gain from an otherwise —

Margaret Goldberg: I think totally do that. I've had the same experience that Stephen has. I think another thing that is actually a silver lining is that parents are much more aware of the instruction that their children are receiving. I see that because I see them in the background, or I see an arm that's there while I'm teaching.

But I also hear it in students work. So, our students record their reading aloud every day in a platform called Seesaw, and I hear parents prompting with the same prompts that I give. So, I'll hear parents say, "Sound it out." Or I'll hear a kid recording a video where they're answering a question, and I'll hear parents say, "Say more about that." And I'm like, "I say that all the time. Like, thank you so much." We're actually really working in partnership, and kids are getting more support, because they have somebody who is there with them all the time, who understands what instruction for a child about skill level looks like and sounds like.

Katharine B. Stevens: That's fascinating. That makes — yeah, go ahead.

Lani Mednick: Just to add to that, I've had so many parents reach out and say like, "What else can I do to help?" Like, they want to go to workshops. They want to have all the tools they can to support their students at home. And so yeah, they're really seeing, like, what the student is working on and specific skills that a student is struggling with and want more many times.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, Jasmin, do you want to comment on this?

Jasmin Tow: Yeah, I just put in the chat that I would agree that I think parents seeing our instruction is helpful for them. They learn how to complement and reinforce more than just sending home, like, paper homework that went home every week, you know, in the before times, or isolated workshop. Not that we have had a lot of success with parent workshops, especially in making explicit like, here's the sounds that are transferable between English and Spanish, so whatever your kid is reading, they should make the same sound when they say the letter M. And talking about the science of reading and the different components.

But I think being able to hear that and then see their child in their classroom the next day has both empowered — parents know how to help their students. And then we also see cross-parent connections. You know, one of our last workshops, a parent said, "Here's what I do to incentivize my kid," and pulled out one of those, the science fair boards and said, "I cut a hole in it and put sticker, and I can see through their little office, and I put stickers on it every time I catch her paying attention." And I was like, "Okay, I'll just sit back and let you all talk about your strategy for managing this, because my kids aren't school age yet, so you know more than I do." So, it's been really great.

Lani Mednick: We also —

Katharine B. Stevens: Yeah, go ahead, Lani.

Lani Mednick: There's one thing. We had just started parent support groups, where parents are just supporting one another.

Katharine B. Stevens: On Zoom? Zoom tech support.

Lani Mednick: Zoom, yeah, and so there's like a Spanish one, an English one, just so like, they can all communicate with each other. They're just like giving each other's strategies. And we have our clinicians, the counselors that are holding that space just to hear each other out. It's not a problem-solving space; it's more of like a therapeutic space. That's something that didn't happen in past years.

Katharine B. Stevens: So, you know, this is striking me as an extraordinary win within a big lose, in the sense that, I mean, you guys are actually moving into our role as almost a parent/coach in a way that hadn't occurred to me. I mean, this is, you know, that you're in the family's, the teachers, you guys are in the family's house, which it sounds as though is something that's proving to be enormously valuable for these families.

I mean, Margaret, to hear the parent literally learning how to be teaching their own child is extremely powerful. Then the question, we actually just got a question from the audience, on the flip side of it then, what are you seeing this play out like for children who don't have engaged parents, either because their parent is working and literally cannot be there or is struggling with something that's just making it not possible for them to be supportive and engaged in this way? I just really want to talk about that. Margaret, what are your thoughts?

Margaret Goldberg: I mean, I have students whose parents are working, or they work the night shift, so they're sleeping during the day, or they need to be working and they're not available, even if they're in the same home. So, if that's the case for quite a few of my first graders.

I think one of the things that is both heartbreaking and heartening is that some of those kids are the ones who are like logging into a Zoom session 15–20 minutes early in the hopes of being able to just chat with me while I'm getting stuff set up. Or they'll be in Seesaw recording their voice, singing songs to themselves as they're doing their math. Or they'll want to make extra videos where they answer additional questions they've made up for themselves, or they want to share their dance moves. I think they're actually really reaching out to try to connect with adults who are able to talk with them and interact with them.

I think sometimes, it's the best moments, like I get a chance to be able to chat with them and get to know them better and stuff. And sometimes it makes me really sad because I realize how lonely you must have to be to decide that logging into school via Zoom early is the best way to get your needs met in that particular moment.

Katharine B. Stevens: Who else has thoughts on this? What are you seeing with kids? What's going on with kids who don't have enough parent support at home to be able to engage in the way we've been talking about? Stephen, what are you seeing with your — sorry, Jasmin, did you want to say something?

Jasmin Tow: Do you want to start, Stephen?

Stephen Cilono: No, go ahead, Jasmin, please.

Jasmin Tow: I was going to say we definitely have some students in that situation. And to Margaret's point, it's largely the parent work schedule, or the child oftentimes needs supervision that's not possible. Because to Stephen's point, like, I go to work and we eat, or I don't and we are evicted, you know. So, we've tried to get creative about our solutions. You know, one of the security features of Zoom is a waiting room, so having parents like, you can log them into their computer at 6:00 in the morning, and they'll sit in the waiting room until class starts and I'll say, "Hey, come over, we're getting started."

We've tried to do asynchronous work, so for some students, we've put together Google slide decks that they can work on at any time, and, you know, "Put your answer here, or put your answer here." And of course, this limit is not the same as group instruction, but I've seen some kids who are really motivated by that, because they're like, "Okay, when my dad gets home at 7:00 p.m., we'll work on it together." Teachers, if we know something's happening in advance, have recorded their Zoom sessions and sent them out. And then we even made provisions, you know, for families to, we do drive-through pickup or tech support or things so folks don't have to come in the building, and then we'll give them paper materials and say, you know, "Work on this."

So, trying to stay in communication and be nonjudgmental. I think in my school's case, many of the times when kids have fallen off the radar, it's because someone in the family or the household has COVID, so they have been worried about getting food. So, we've done home deliveries of food. Our school's Title I, so kids are entitled to, you know, breakfast and lunch, and then we got a grant suite to provide dinner and breakfast and lunch for the adults in the home as well.

So, staying nonjudgmental and calling from a place of, "Hi, I'm checking up," rather than, "You haven't been on, you are in trouble," has gone so far to be able to know what's going

on, especially when it's been COVID in the household or someone's been really ill, and the family, of course, is scared, so.

Katharine B. Stevens: Stephen, what have your experiences been with the less engaged, more isolated kids who don't have that kind of support?

Stephen Cilono: It really has been for me, I mean, I'll echo everything that Jasmin said, and then I would add for me, it's been a case-by-case basis. Some students who — I think of a young lady named Margaret right now, and I know for a fact that she works by herself and takes care of her little sister, and she takes care of all her business. She completes every single assignment. And it's fantastic, and the quality is fantastic. And then I'm thinking of other students who literally do nothing, or they'll often attend Zoom class, which I find heartbreaking on some level, just because they want to have that connection. That they're in attendance, but they're completing the work.

So, it really ranges. You know, so the children, or the child, forgive me, doesn't have that parent support, there's no one response. Some are continuing to flourish, some have really found themselves, and others have lost themselves.

Katharine B. Stevens: So that's, I think, a good transition to what I'm really eager to hear you guys' thoughts on. In our prep call for the event I shared with you, and we sent ahead of time, people here in Washington, DC, I and others come up with what we think are really great ideas. I am very eager for your thoughts on those or other ideas.

So, one of the things I'd sent you was an article that I wrote, which discussed among other things, England is establishing a national tutoring program, which is both providing access to subsidized, you know, like Kaplan or something like that, subsidized tutoring. So, Lani, you or Jasmin, you guys, as the principals or as administrators, you would decide what tutoring program you want to work with. And it's subsidized by the government. So, you'd have it both in-person and online. A lot of it, I think, is online. That's the one part of it.

And then the other part of it are like AmeriCorps or Peace Corps, like, volunteers, in-person tutors who are in the school available to work one-on-one, provide additional support to kids. So, that's one idea.

There's a really smart guy at the Fordham Institute, Mike Petrilli, who's been writing essentially a couple of these things. He's writing a lot on this question. A couple of the ideas he's been throwing out are, one is adding a grade, he's terming at 2.5, an additional grade for the elementary school kids. He's suggesting actually, perhaps permanently, that elementary school would benefit from having an additional year to get kids ready for middle school.

Or just to allow children to add an entire new year, have the kids do the whole year over again. So, obviously, you could just add on another year, so kids who are in eighth grade now are in eighth grade again, or kids who are in first grade now are in first grade again. But they could be with a different teacher, right? Or you could have a situation where your kids, Stephen, they're in ninth grade now, Margaret, your kids are now in second grade, but they're still with you. And then a whole bunch of other ideas that I haven't thought of.

So, starting from those, I'm interested in your comments on those ideas and what else you think. Let's just assume that we're back in school and things are normal, you know, functionally in the fall. What do you think has to happen to recover this?

Margaret Goldberg: I think one thing that's so neat about hearing those ideas is that there's any number of ways that we could try to fix the situation. I think one part of me keeps going to the response, "Well, we have to do it with the resources that we have." I love the idea, for example, of adding in an extra grade or letting kids have a redo or whatever it is that needs to happen. But we still need to serve the same amount of kids that would need to be served in the following year, so that means that we need to have more credentialed teachers, and they need to be highly skilled. And because staffing is already an issue, we already have vacancies in our district that are left unfilled, I can't imagine being able to get more people to be able to fill those roles.

That said, I think that there's a lot of potential for people to be able to start helping, who are not credentialed educators. I'm really curious to hear what others think about the tutoring option, because I think if we had people who are really well trained to work on specific things with students, then we might actually be able to receive those resources and turn them into something good for students, rather than saying like, "We're going to do an extra year, and we're not going to give you anybody to be able to fill these classrooms," which then turns into another problem that the school has to deal with.

Katharine B. Stevens: Right, and if you're just sort of putting any warm bodies there, then that just then backfires, right? So, Margaret, for something you've mentioned before, like on a scale of one to 10, how much would you prefer, whether we called it first grade or second grade, how much would you prefer to have your same kids again, starting in September?

Margaret Goldberg: I mean, I would absolutely love to. I know that what ends up happening is you are working in a system where that decision impacts everybody else, so it means that every other teacher in the school now has to learn a new set of curriculum if we're all moving up grade, which means that people might be teaching specific grade level for the first time and have to deal with a curriculum of that and the standards of that level. So, I don't ever want to make a decision for myself without thinking about the ripple effect that it's going to have on other people. It might be good for me, but it wouldn't necessarily be good for them.

I do think on something that's been really helpful to me is seeking support from other people to try to help my kiddos. I have a student teacher, I have volunteers, I have parents that I'm working with. I'm trying to do everything that I can to make it so that kids are adequately prepared for the next year. We need that same kind of resources next year to get kids caught up. I think that's what I'm working on. I think it's the least impactful way of solving the problem, is to get accelerated gains for our students during this time and distance learning, and then keep those supports up when we go back in-person, to make sure that we're not in a perpetual state of being behind.

Katharine B. Stevens: And Margaret, what do you think about the idea of them being in first grade again with you next year? Is that something that would be unacceptable to parents?

Margaret Goldberg: I think one of the things that I saw in that article that you had sent us was the unfortunate labeling of holding kids back. I think when we label it in a negative way, so kids are being retained, that's not okay. It emphasizes a problem that was completely outside of their control. Our society has decided certain things happen at certain ages, so I can't imagine what it would be like for everybody to have the experience of driving, for example, when they're like, a ninth or 10th grader, or something like that. Everything would shift.

I think I'm really trying to focus on figuring out how we can have second grade fill in some of the gaps that were left over from in first grade, probably.

Katharine B. Stevens: Right. So, I think one of Mike's ideas would be, let's just say in that case, it's called second grade, what you're doing next year, right? But then there would be a 2.5 year that would follow that, you know, and if you had the entire cohort going kindergarten, first grade, grade one, grade two, grade 2.5, grade three, then they're not getting held back, they're getting like an extra year for what I guess people are calling education recovery. What does that sound like?

Margaret Goldberg: I mean, our schools are packed, so to be able to fit in extra students, to be able to have additional classrooms and additional staffing, that's putting the burden on the school to try to figure out how to educate more kids for longer.

Katharine B. Stevens: Yes, that makes perfect sense. Lani, did you want to comment?

Lani Mednick: Sure, I think it's less about adding another year and more about just meeting all of our kids where they're at. There's so many differentiation needs. We could accelerate with more adults that are well trained and supported with specific needs, so like really, all hands on deck with like small math groups, small writing groups, small reading groups. It doesn't matter what grade the kids are, we want to meet them where they are, so even multigrade or multiage blocks. If kids are met at the level or where they're at, and then moved to get more and more proficiency, I see that really working.

But the folks that do support, there's a lot of communication that's needed. There's a lot of training that's needed. I believe it could happen, like, we already see this with our early literacy tutors. We have volunteers that we have, just to not just leave everything on the classroom teacher for instruction.

Katharine B. Stevens: What do you think of the idea of scaling up either access to the professional Kaplan, like, tutoring systems and/or scaling up the AmeriCorps literacy volunteer programs, for example, so that there were more volunteers, whether people in their 20s who maybe don't have a job? Or another piece of this that I find really fascinating is older adults, even retired adults who are willing to be tutors to work with — I guess the research is showing that one-on-one to one-on-three is most effective often. What are your thoughts on that?

Lani Mednick: I'm all for it. I definitely think the more folks helping, the better. Yeah, and again, I just think that it will take a lot of communication and coordination to make sure that, like, no kids slip through the cracks, nor any content slips through the cracks. But we could be really creative in how we're differentiating instruction.

Like, we have a lot of folks that take, like, the highest group so that the teacher can really zoom in with those that need additional support, because they have more refined skills and training in those particular areas. But all students' needs can be covered with more adults helping with the grouping and differentiation.

Katharine B. Stevens: Right. So essentially, what you're saying is rather than adding an additional year, just get more out of the year that you have?

Lani Mednick: Yes, exactly.

Katharine B. Stevens: Stephen, did you want to comment? Well, first of all, I want to ask you, would you like to have the same group of kids again next year, or are you guys going to be done?

Stephen Cilono: The length of a relationship with middle schoolers probably is a little more finite. But no, I would love to have them back. That's the irony here is this is just one of the most wonderful, sweetest, and most intelligent bunch of kids I've had in years. And I love them to death, so not being able to be with them is frustrating, so I'd love to have them another year.

Having said that, I want to latch on to a word that resonated with me that Lani used, which was "creative." I think it's important that more instructional minutes does not necessarily equate to better outcomes, so having them just repeat a year. We've had an instructional gap that has existed long before the pandemic that, just to be frank, we haven't been able to close. So, repeating what has already shown to be ineffective does not sound like it's going to yield the outcomes we're looking for.

So, being creative, reassigning resources. If we're dedicated to doing something like that, then I'd be all for adding a year, if you will.

Katharine B. Stevens: And what do you think about the tutoring idea? Let's just say next year, you're in-person and you're teaching eighth grade, what kinds of outside people do you need? Social workers? Tutors? What are you imagining that the outside resources you're going to wish you had when you're back in your classroom next fall with eighth graders in-person, let's say, as you're imagining they're going to be?

Stephen Cilono: Yeah, all of the above. I mean, if I'm given a menu of choices, I will take all of those because I think those are all going to be needs. But I'm trying to be a little more realistic. Just having a second or third body in the room, being able to create when you have, you know, 29 students in a classroom, being able to create multiple small groups, being instructed at about a one-to-five, one-to-six ratio is incredibly effective. Yeah, so that would be incredible. That would be fantastic. So, the idea of tutoring, assuming that they're being trained well, would be fantastic.

Margaret Goldberg: I'm going to surprise myself by saying that my wish for next year is more Zoom. The reason for that is that I would love to be in-person with my students, teaching them, and to have them have a person that they can read to. I think the easiest way to do that is via a computer so that they could actually read to someone and get feedback on their reading, or read their writing aloud to someone and show it, to be able to have that kind of engagement.

I think one of the things that happens in the in-person instruction that Stephen was referring to is that anytime you're pulling a small group, what are the other kids doing? And in the younger grades, they can't do that much independently, they really need to have somebody giving them feedback on the things that they're doing. So, I love the idea of having an army of people all over the country, who are willing to log into Zoom and listen to kids read out loud or listen to kids read their writing out loud.

Katharine B. Stevens: Interesting.

Margaret Goldberg: They don't have to provide instruction. They just need to make sure that there's accountability for the work. I can do the teaching. I just need kids to be able to get some support during the application portion.

Katharine B. Stevens: You know, that's interesting. That hadn't occurred to me that you could have volunteers in-person, but that hadn't occurred to me that you could have volunteers. My own retired mother would love to do that, for example. You know, volunteers who were operating at a distance on Zoom, that's really —

Margaret Goldberg: Yeah, we're doing that right now. So, I do the instruction, and then I'll have a volunteer who will go into a breakout room and work with students, reading with them. I think one of the things that has been so helpful is to realize that kids actually are adjusting quite well to this. My 6-year-olds are like, "Here, let me share my screen so that you can see the text I'm reading. I'll point to each word with my cursor as I'm reading aloud to you," and they can do it.

Katharine B. Stevens: Interesting. Interesting. Jasmin, what are your thoughts?

Jasmin Tow: You know, in my school, we talk a lot about being trauma-informed, and this probably talks a lot about relationships. And so I think, for me, the continuity in relationships and folks who share our same philosophy about educating our students and respect for our students and families is super important. And so I think tutoring an additional adult support would be great, but I would like, like the funding for that and the infrastructure, to be money that's funneled into community members to do it, rather than "outsiders."

I think we've had like AmeriCorps volunteers at our school before, and we've had some that are great. But of course, people do, you know, their service and then they leave. And that's challenging. Even if the person was great, it can be destabilizing, because they weren't necessarily managed by someone on our team, so their metrics for success and our metrics are different. If the person was not great, we didn't have the power to, like, get rid of them, and it's, you know, it was challenging for students.

And so I'd like to see that, you know, like we've talked about with parents and all the things they're doing and caregivers, and what would it look like to train folks who live in the community who have students at the school, who will continue to have students at the school, who could do it more than a year.

I also think, you know, our school is big on — we like liberatory design mindsets, which were designed by National Equity Project in collaboration with Stanford Design School. And one of the mindsets is creating — they call it "safe to fail experiments," and the idea is like,

as you're tackling a large challenge, how do you take small steps and try things out that if it didn't go well, the entire bottom wouldn't fall out?

And I think in this, you know, we're currently still in. We have some hard data and anecdotal data about what's happening with students, but we don't know where our current students will be in, like, 12 years. You know, like our kindergarteners, we don't know what the impact will be when they're graduating from high school.

So, I think it's challenging to try to make a large-scale solution when we can't even see the extent of the problem. It's like that psychology experiment where they have, you know, young kids look at, walk around a mountain and they say, "What do you see?" and the kids name what's in front of them, because their ability to perceive what was on the other side isn't there. I think even we, as adults, and we have experience and education, are still like that. We don't see the other side of the mountain yet. We're still, you know, chipping away in our own seats. So, I think I would say that.

And then the other option, you mention, oh, the looping with great things, I think I would agree with what a few folks have shared, that our buildings don't have the room. My hunch is that more people will want to, you know, enroll their children in school, because the nature of our nation is that school is, you know, free childcare.

That's what folks need to get back to work, to get back to their jobs, and so I don't think, you know, we don't have the room to take in a new set of TK kindergarteners, which would be, at our school, it'd be about 90 kids, plus the other 420 we already have. We physically don't have the room, and we know that that's a need to be met. So, I couldn't see that happening in our current building or with the current way that school is set up, you know, as childcare for families.

Katharine B. Stevens: Yeah, and then there was just a comment from the audience, which I think echoes what a couple of you guys have said, which is, if you're increasing the need for staff by adding additional grades, or for any reason, but you aren't getting good people, you've really cut your nose off to spite your face. Like, you're not moving yourself or kids forward.

I think my work was with teachers. I ran a teaching apprenticeship program, which it seems as though it's what's needed at this time, which is to put a person who is perhaps even wanting to be a teacher, to be working with professional teachers but in a learning way, and also people you can, frankly, get rid of if you're finding that they are being counterproductive. Because I can imagine that adding on people who you think are maybe even hurting kids more than they're helping will be an aggravating, not a positive, factor. Is that right?

Well, let me just say this. So, we have five minutes left, maybe we can each, you guys could each take a minute or so to just share final thoughts and what you're hoping that people are going to be keeping — you know, the rest of the world, the outside school world — what you're hoping people are going to be able to keep in mind about what's coming or what you're needing for the next several months. Who wants to start? Lani, do you want to start?

Lani Mednick: Sure. What should we keep in mind? I think we just all need patience with one another and the process and to continue doing what we're doing in terms of like giving it

our all, being open to being flexible and creative. As Stephen was highlighting, like, there's different needs. And then being ready and willing to start the next year, in an innovative way, doing things that we've never done before to best support students in acceleration, and supporting them in the learning gaps that will be inevitable, and as Jasmin was saying, unknown at this point.

Like, we know certain pieces that there will be gaps, but I think we have to be adaptive and ready to solve new problems and, I think, continue with that silver lining conversation we were talking about, like, continue to catalyze, utilize the relationships that we've built with the community, continue strengthening those bonds so that we're not doing this alone and that it is a community effort.

Yeah, so just patience for one another and the process and a drive for doing what we need to for the kids.

Katharine B. Stevens: Lani, one quick question. When you say "Creative things that haven't been done before," the thing I've been hearing you emphasizing is things like creating sort of level-based smaller groups that aren't necessarily tied to particular grades. Is that the sort of thing you're thinking about when you say, "creative things"?

Lani Mednick: Yeah, I think not just like a teacher needs to take care of the many needs of their classroom. I think as an assistant principal, I plan to next year still pull groups. I want librarians and clinicians. I want everybody at the site, tutors, all invested in the needs of the students, so teachers are not alone in grappling with and having full ownership over everything that is happening in their spaces. Yeah.

And different school days, like understanding what we've learned about the strength of technology in many ways and incorporating that in the classroom and like rethinking how we're using instructional minutes.

Katharine B. Stevens: Mm-hmm. Stephen, do you want to —

Stephen Cilono: Sure, I'll ride Lani's coattails again. She's used the word "open-mindedness," and I go back to just being really frank and honest with ourselves. You know, we weren't knocking it out of the park prior to the pandemic, so perhaps yet another silver lining of the pandemic of distance learning is a chance to reimagine what school looks like, you know. Because again, we weren't knocking it out of the park before, so, you know, let's use this as an impetus to create change and to be open-minded about what that looks like.

People brighter than me will have to tackle that one, but I think it's one of the things we can do is identify those silver linings that we've talked about and incorporate those into the school year, next year, the hopefully, standard school year physical environment.

Margaret Goldberg: I think something that would be really wise, I know a lot of people are trying to help right now and trying to think of creative ideas. I think looking to the teachers, the principals that are actually making big changes for kids, so looking at starting in the year data and who is actually really moving kids reliably, and then asking those people what they need.

Because it's very easy for us to come up with ideas and then to have people who will have to implement be like, "No, that doesn't work. We don't literally have the space in our buildings for this idea." But if you ask those people, "Well, what do you need? What do highly effective teachers and principals need?" they will be able to come up with solutions that actually work in their context.

Katharine B. Stevens: Jasmin?

Jasmin Tow: Yeah, I'd say, you know, the pandemic, I think we on this call probably knew, but we've pulled the dirty laundry from under the bed, you know, when it comes to the other factors related to poverty, related to economic blight in the community, related to food insecurity, and not sweeping those under the rug when we can go back in the building I think will be super important.

I think teachers, we are so fortunate to have so many educators that bring the energy and the passion. And like, we can't solve a hunger crisis in East Oakland. We can't solve, you know, the economic blight that's brought about by the Walmart that closed down that was a major employer. And so I think for folks outside of education, being willing to step up and see that, like, helping with that does help our kids be able to learn, and so not having it all funneled down to the folks in the school staff.

I think it'll be really important to keep that dirty laundry out when we go back into the building to make — I love what Stephen said about like reimagine schools. Because the system, I've heard someone say a system produces what it's designed to produce, and so our system is producing the inequalities because it's designed to produce those.

Katharine B. Stevens: Well, I want to thank you guys all very, very much. It has been a fascinating conversation, and I very much appreciate your time. You're all in California, so we started at 7:00 a.m. your time. I believe you are all about to get on Zoom and teach, so thank you very, very much. And thanks very much, to our audience, for joining us.