



IN WAKE OF PANDEMIC, EDUCATORS LOOK TOWARD RENEWAL

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

This spring marks three years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for students and educators, it is impossible to ignore the changes to our shared environments during this historic time.

In spring 2020, a crisis that began with extended spring breaks soon stretched toward the end of the school year, followed by the shifting landscapes of Zoom classes, remote learning, masking, and social distance requirements that changed far too quickly for many teachers and students.

As a result of so many physical and mental health challenges, along with generalized stress and upheaval exacerbated by the pandemic, many school districts in our nation are now faced with unprecedented shortages among teachers and school staff.

And yet this crisis, like all others, offers opportunities. For decades, the U.S. has seen a narrowing in entry requirements for the teaching profession, often resulting in a workforce that does not align demographically with our student population. Pew Research statistics, for example, indicate that in 2018, over 53% of public school students across the U.S. were people of color, compared to only 21% of public school teachers.

Thus the pandemic, perhaps counterintuitively, opens a window to welcoming more prospective teachers into this much-needed profession. According to the Brookings Institution, “The higher-than-normal turnover among teachers could even be viewed as an opportunity for vanguard states and districts to make quick progress on teacher diversity—if they prioritize recruiting and supporting teachers of color.”

In cooperation with my colleagues, I have spent the past year piloting a teacher residency program at our regional university, in partnership with our local school district, aimed at supporting bilingual students via culturally relevant teaching and increased teacher diversity. We are still making our way toward the end of the school year, but we have already learned much about ways to recruit, support, and sustain a diverse teacher corps in our public schools.

We have faced struggles in meeting basic teacher needs, such as affordable housing, as well as in aligning our university admissions procedures to make them more welcoming and user-friendly. We have also found that relationships between veteran teachers and newcomers require a strengths-based mindset. Our program has instituted regular meetings that encourage mentors to view new teachers’ life skills learned through perseverance as assets rather than focusing on potential deficits.

For example, some of our teacher residents who transitioned from jobs in the service industry needed increased training in using computer technology, so we asked our university tutoring center to develop targeted workshops on Google Classroom, Canvas, and other platforms that provide the infrastructure for today’s classrooms. Younger teacher residents took the initiative to offer impromptu coaching sessions on technology for their older colleagues, building confidence for all involved while strengthening communication and trust.

As spring arrives, it offers opportunities for renewal and reflection along with welcome bursts of sunlight and green shoots. Despite the challenges wrought by three years of upheaval, we can all seek ways to use the lessons we have learned as we move forward into our shared future.



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