THE YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

So here we are – December 2020, 10 months since we first began the COVID-19 restrictions. By any measure it has been a tragic and disheartening school year. We all want to have our students back in the classroom but we also want to do it safely so that all school personnel, as well as students, are safe. There is some evidence that limited attendance in classrooms for primary grade students can be done safely in combination with stringent COVID protocols. Extending those precautions and restrictions to all K-12 classes is logistically impossible with current classroom space and teaching staff, to say nothing of current (and inadequate) state and federal education funding. Understandably, this reality is upsetting to parents who see what is lost in online learning. It doesn’t do anyone any good, however, to engage in angry finger pointing directed at teachers (or teachers unions), administrators, or school boards who are making a sincere effort to follow public health guidelines. We all want to get back to school!

On a more hopeful note, the light at the end of the tunnel right now seems not to be an oncoming train, but rather real hope in the form of vaccines. As I write this, we are likely only a day away from FDA emergency approval of the first vaccine. By this time next month it seems well within reach to have vaccinated tens of millions of the most vulnerable among us. Within another two to three months every one of us should be able to receive the required two doses of vaccine. This should dramatically change the dynamics of this disease, giving us the prospect of near normalcy by this time next year.

In spite of this positive development, health professionals are urging us not to relax our vigilance. We all have pandemic fatigue, but this is not the time to let our guard down. We are being told that mixing of households during the holidays has, and will continue, to drive up the infection rates to a level that will overwhelm local hospitals. As I write this, Los Angeles County has an average of only 10.9% ICU beds available.

There is more than enough evidence to show that mask wearing and social distancing work. At least until the New Year we should avoid indoor gatherings completely and curtail large family gatherings, even outdoors. If you think you have a right to risk your own health, please consider whether you have a right to risk another person’s health. Our U.S. Constitution memorializes individual freedoms, but it also enshrines a commitment to the general welfare. Health experts say a person wearing a mask is more than doubly protected when they come in contact with another individual wearing a mask. Choosing to wear a mask and social distancing are simple to do – let us get it done and we will all see each other on the other side of this pandemic, healthy and safe.

Together we are stronger. Together we need to forge ahead and be aware of each other, so we do not become the ones who look for the path of least resistance during moments of strife. Instead let us, teachers, counselors, nurses, and speech and language pathologists, work together to support each other so our voices are heard, and action is taken to effect change that is needed in BUSD.
Showerthoughts 2020 -- Really, why do I teach? What's stopping me from calling it quits in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and making my current work outfit of athleisure and pajama bottoms permanent attire?

Yes, at the risk of painting an unflattering picture of myself right now, these are the actual thoughts I've been having during my morning shower before I start my back-to-back-to-back online sessions and endless online grading.

Sometimes, after a particularly silent Google Meet session when only two kids out of 36 have their cameras on and the sound of myself talking to a blank screen is echoing into the void, I sit there asking myself "WHY?" Those are the days when I entertain the fantasy of doing stand-up comedy (I have horrible stage fright) or making millions off of a YouTube channel (I barely learned how to record a video on my phone) or retiring early and selling my "artwork" at a roadside stand in Hawaii. All too often in these strange, time-warped days in quarantine, this has become my "default mode" -- one where the danger of falling into negativity and wallowing in self-pity is rationalized as "self-care" and the question of "Why do I teach?" is a broken record meant to question all of my life choices rather than a thought-provoking query about professional practice. Don't judge! Please tell me I'm not the only one feeling this way at this moment in our lives.

These are strange times. Uncertainty, unrest, uneasiness -- this is the background highlighting the less than ideal situation in which we find ourselves. I'm calling it a win when more than a handful of kids have cameras on, the chat is on-topic and it seems like most of the kids in my session are engaged and participating in the discussion. The highlight of my week came in the form of a sixth grader making the simple comment that my lesson was fun (and that I looked good on camera today!). Yes! A HUGE win. What used to be the light bulb of understanding in a child's eyes has now been replaced by a thumbs up sign or a simple "yes" in the chat window -- but that's less than half of the class and maybe only five students at most -- on a good day.

It is in these moments that I need to remind myself -- and you -- that we are plodding along and fighting the good fight because, even though it might not seem like it, there are young human beings on the other side of that screen. Some of them got up today just because that's the one thing they could manage to do. Some of them are in attendance because mom promised them that they could be on their phones for an hour after all their work was done. And yes, some of them genuinely want to learn, to understand new things, to grow.

I have two of my own BUSD students at home right now. I see firsthand what it's like to be on the other side of the screen and hear a teacher tell them jokes to brighten their day, to check in with them to make sure they are okay, to hear words of encouragement from another adult outside their bubble - -and it means the world. For some of our kids, those are the only adults aside from their own who will spend time with them, listen to them, be there for them. It matters. WHAT WE DO MATTERS!

This is the why - the kindness in practice - the effect - the investment into a life, a mind, a heart. Never mind that we are separated by band-width and cameras and...
signals right now. There is still a capacity to make a connection, to matter to someone, to make a difference - - even if it's in just one student's day.

Those are the things I tell myself when that nagging "Why?" comes popping into my brain. Because we can. Because we will. Because that's what we do.

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UniServ Director’s Message by Nate Banditelli

From time to time, BTA members have asked me about what they can and cannot say in the classroom or about what kind of clothing or accessories they can wear if the message could be considered political. With racial justice issues at the center of our national and district conversations, the CTA Legal Services Department published a guide to help you understand the boundaries of your speech rights in the classroom. The following is taken from the guide:

As schools have moved towards distanced learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have raised questions regarding their ability to display racial equity messages in their virtual classrooms.

In most cases, wearing a Black Lives Matter (BLM) t-shirt or displaying a statement of support in your virtual classroom (e.g., a BLM poster in the background) is permissible. School employers may impose reasonable, viewpoint-neutral restrictions on political speech in the classroom, but most school employers do not restrict messages promoting justice, inclusion, and racial equity. Indeed, the Education Code requires teachers to impress upon their students the principles of justice, equality and human dignity. (Education Code § 233.5). In addition, school employers are required to affirmatively adopt policies aimed at reducing and prohibiting discrimination and violence (Education Code § 234.1). The type of “political” messages that a district may restrict are messages that support or oppose electoral candidates and ballot measures, and even then, those restrictions may only apply to speech while “on the clock” and working with students.

However, it is important to remember that a school employer may regulate classroom speech during working hours, as long as those regulations are viewpoint neutral. So, for example, a district may prohibit teachers from discussing current events or other matters not related to the curriculum during work time. It is also important to know that the First Amendment’s free speech provision generally does not protect public employees – particularly in Pre-K-12 schools – when employees speak while teaching or performing other instructional duties. While working, you are considered to be speaking as an employee on behalf of the district. You of course have First Amendment rights to speak as a private citizen, outside of working hours, on matters of public concern. For example, you have a constitutional right to attend a BLM rally outside of working hours. Similarly, you have rights under the First Amendment and the Educational Employment Relations Act (EERA) to join with your union on non-work time to engage in activities that promote racial equity.

If you are asked to remove a racial justice or similar message that is visible in your classroom by an administrator, you should comply with the employer’s instruction in order to avoid discipline, and then contact BTA to make sure that your rights are preserved.
Around The Bell- YES, We Are Open

by Tamara Perry --- Jefferson ATB

As teachers and students adapt to distance learning, Around The Bell teachers are adjusting our own program, class schedules and job descriptions. We are now multiple subject teachers, custodians and tech support.

ATB currently has eight sites open with a total of 51 TK-5 students and 18 teachers. Some sites have two classrooms with nine students in each room while another might have one room with two students. Safety is our number one priority during this uncertain year. All sites have safety standards and procedures. Washing hands is a constant, bathrooms are sprayed down and cleaned as soon as a child exits and temperatures are taken three times a day. Everyone must wear a mask properly at all times. Many of us wondered how the masks would “go over” with children (especially the 5 year olds) but they are on top of it.

“Keeping the kids separate and not allowing them to play with each other is challenging at times. They can play the same activities but, can’t actually play together,” says Edison ATB teacher Kym Stilgenbauer. “Another difference this year is the constant cleaning. After every toy is touched it has to be sanitized. Each kid is given a tray of toys that only they can touch and when they are done playing a teacher sprays down all the toys and the tray”.

Jefferson ATB teacher Carrie Hibbard adds, "We are now in charge of making sure all the computers are running properly, that they check in with their daily attendance, they are taking their breaks and lunches on time, they have all their work completed correctly and also help them with any technical difficulties they may have." Also noting, "I love my job and wanted to be here for the kids -- to help them have some normalcy and consistency in their life"

Our program took a big hit with the gigantic tuition hike, people retiring and those that took a leave because of COVID-19. Changes seem to be coming around every corner and looks like more will take place in the New Year. Our program is running very smoothly at the moment and that is in part to the great direction we are given by Stephanie Fields- Coordinator of Child Development programs in BUSD. Those of us working are all in agreeance, we are very proud of our students. They are the reason we are here and they are the reason we stay. Shout out to all the ATB
Edison Teachers celebrate the holidays with “zoom” inspired poses during their December Faculty Meeting! Happy Holidays!

Don’t Miss Out On CTA Access to Savings Deals For The Holidays!

Do you love your CTA Access to Savings deals? Is this the first time you're hearing about CTA membership savings of up to 50% on everyday things such as food, clothing, car care, travel, entertainment, home and garden and more?

The CTA Access to Savings network offers you exclusive, value-packed, easily redeemable, convenient savings. You may not even notice this update, but we wanted to let you know of an upcoming change related to the emails you receive from the program:

- The CTA Access to Savings discount email domain name will be changing from email@member-email.com to cta@enjoymydeals.com.
- Be sure to add cta@enjoymydeals.com to your email address book to ensure you continue seeing these discount emails in your inbox.
- Enjoy your deals on your mobile device by downloading the MyDeals app with your CTA program code: 200449 and your 10-digit CTA Member ID.

Any questions? Call (650) 552-5200 or visit CTAMemberBenefits.org/access.

University Credit & Professional Growth Hours

New this year, CTA will pay for your university credit through our new University Credit Season Pass program. Credit for CTA conference attendees is available exclusively through California State University, Chico. To earn university credit, attend a combination of live and recorded sessions totaling 15 hours during the entire conference season (we’ll even help you track the hours). You can attend multiple conferences to acquire the needed hours. Many districts offer salary increases based on additional university credit. More information and details are available on CTA.org. You must register for the conferences to be eligible for the University Credit Season Pass.
Wishing you a happy and healthy 2021!

Burbank Teachers Association

Relay For Life events are life-changing cancer fundraising events that help communities across the globe fight back against cancer.

2021 Relay is tentatively scheduled for August 1st.

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