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Going Remote? Don't Let It Rock Your Boat.

You CAN make virtual learning work for you and your students.

by Hannah French

Crafting remote learning plans is an overwhelming task! We're floating in a sea of possibilities, and it's difficult to know where to begin. Here are three ideas that have helped guide our plans at my school...

Be Clear and Consistent

One of the great things about remote learning is that there's no "right way." Hopefully, you have the freedom to find something that works for your classroom — and to make adjustments as you go.

Remember that it's a lot of work to learn any digital platform. So pick one and stick with it. Help your students learn its ins and outs, and find ways to maximize it for everyone's benefit. A consistent schedule also makes a world of difference, so try to build a routine of work times and meetings for structured remote days. Finally, written instructions and simple rubrics help to define clear expectations.

Think Outside the Box

We need to think outside the box... and the "can," for that matter. We are highly qualified professionals, capable of developing remote programming that engages our students *without* turning to a costly canned program from an outside ed-tech developer.

The "boxes" in this case are the 8-by-12-inch screen of our computers, which I'm certain we have all spent more time on in the past six months than ever before. One of our main goals has been to minimize screen time, getting students off computers for hands-on activities and projects. For example, one of our reading projects this spring was to create a puppet based on a

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character you read about. The resulting creations, a variety of hand and stick puppets, were joyfully presented in a Friday morning meeting.

Emphasize Connection

Finally, it is essential that we emphasize connection. We care deeply about our students, and we work hard to maintain positive classroom communities. We can't forget about this in our remote model!

This is perhaps the most challenging piece of the work — and it is possible! We can create compassionate digital spaces where students feel empowered to participate. What might that look like for your classroom?

This past spring, in our virtual morning meetings, we tried a variety of activities to engage our students. One day, as students shared stories from time spent outdoors, a common thread emerged: the annoyance of mayflies.



And so, the class spent the rest of the meeting writing a song together about the pesky insect! We took input from everyone and typed out rhyming lyrics on a shared screen. As we practiced our song, a student remarked, “This is fun! Can we do this at EVERY meeting?”

THAT is the kind of remote learning I want my students to experience! My hope is that we can all find remote solutions that enable us to sail steadily on. ■

Hannah French is a third grade teacher at the Rowe Elementary School and an active member of the New Member Committee.



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If You're a New Educator This Year, Be Proactive!

by Alex Hoyt

The early years of any educator's career, especially the first one, are stressful for reasons both good and bad. But this year, educators have an entirely different and daunting challenge to contend with — a global pandemic that has turned our lives, the world, and especially public education upside down.

If you're a new educator this year, it is important that you take proactive steps during this time to keep yourself informed, and thereby protected. Here are a few things you can do to put yourself in a stronger and safer position:

1. If you're newly hired this year, find out who represents you in your local association.

Every local association should have a website where you can find the names and contact information for the building representatives and officers. Find it and locate the representative(s) from your building. These people are your first point of contact to the local, and will be able to provide you support and information regarding how the association is working to protect its members. They will also be able to connect you with officers and other resources, if necessary.

2. Sign up for communication from your local and from the MTA.

There is a lot of information going around on a normal day, and especially so now. Make sure you are in the know in terms of any meetings or actions that your local, or the MTA, might be planning. And obviously ... make sure you attend!

3. Don't be afraid to ask questions and seek help.

Your local exists to serve just one purpose — to advocate for and support its educators. Building reps and local officers sign up



for the job knowing that they are responsible for assisting their members, so don't be afraid to use them — they are an invaluable resource! This is not the time to be shy!

4. Read your school district's reopening plan.

If they haven't already, districts will soon be finalizing and publishing their final plans for reopening schools. Although these documents may be somewhat long and fairly complex, they will contain information that essentially will describe what your life as a teacher will look like this year — for at least the fall. The more you know about the ways your school is planning to organize and execute its mission to educate, the better you will be able to prepare for your role in it!

5. Get and read copies of your contract, and any Memorandum of Agreement documents that your local has negotiated with the school district.

Perhaps even more important than becoming familiar with reopening plans is doing so with your contract (which governs your working conditions this year and in the future) and any agreements that your local association has negotiated with your district. These documents will help you clearly understand your rights and obligations — both generally and especially in this situation of pandemic teaching. ■

Alex is an MTA New Committee Member, fifth grade teacher in Hudson and Vice President of the Hudson Education Association.

Orienting New Hires

by Chelsea Brandwein-Fryar

In Revere, our local has an allotted time slot during the district's New Educator Orientation. In the past, we set up a table along with other groups and resources provided to new members — such as the credit union. Obviously, all of this needs to look a bit different this year. So, similar to the past, the RTA will be given some time to discuss the benefits of joining the union, going over important pieces of our contract and rights, presenting information about our local, and signing members up virtually in a Zoom meeting during the district's orientation.

I will also be updating our presentation to include aspects about our current bargaining processes, the MOA, and the general work our local has done this summer.

Additionally, I plan to engage with our new members outside of



the district's orientation by holding a Social Zoom. Here, I plan to provide a more flexible space for the new hires to share any questions/concerns they have for the upcoming year. I will also provide them with the most recent information regarding the school year.

I hope to start creating a space moving forward for the rest of the year to offer support for this group of new educators. I intend to hold at least a monthly Social Zoom for new educators to discuss challenges/successes and ideas for remote learning, and general updates on union activity. ■

Chelsea Brandwein-Fryar is a member of the MTA's New Member Committee, a teacher at SeaCoast High School in Revere, and Revere's New Member Liaison.

Career Changes During COVID-19

by Zena Link

It goes without saying that educators have been forced to address numerous changes impacting their careers since March. In addition to an abrupt switch from in-class instruction to virtual learning, educators are also dealing with layoffs, furloughs, safety and health concerns, societal unrest and the uncertainty regarding the return to the 2020-2021 school year. This also includes educators like me who have changed school districts during the pandemic.



My move to a new district involved virtual interviews, sample lessons and meeting the new community via Zoom. Although the interviewing process as well as preparation for the new school year required an adjustment, I have tremendous gratitude to have changed districts knowing that over 2,000 educators have been furloughed or laid off across the state. Many of them have not found employment for the upcoming year. The number of layoffs and furloughs in higher education is much higher.

As the uncertainty of school reopenings continues, so do the decisions for educators to remain in their districts — and for some, the field of education. As a result, educators who have lost their jobs and are still seeking employment should continue applying to districts across the state and following up on previous applications. Additionally, the Massachusetts Teachers Association continues to advocate for federal, state and local governments to provide the resources to fully fund schools. If successful, it is more likely that educators will be

reinstated or recalled to their previous jobs. ■

Zena Link is a member of the New Member Committee who also serves on the MTA Board of Directors and as an NEA Director for Massachusetts.

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Have an idea for a column in this newsletter? Interested in having more New Member activities or trainings in your local?

Please let us know! Contact our New Member Organizer, Ashley Adams, at aadams@massteacher.org, 617.878.8314.