

## Loving School in the Time of Corona: Navigating Educational Uncertainty in Alaska

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Last week I learned a game called “Mouse in Ground.”

The kids line up on the side of the “tag in-bound” area with their eyes closed. I, their teacher, walk around very quietly, and very slowly tag one child on the head. That kid is *it*. At that point, I say, “Go.” The kids then run out of the “eyes closed” area and into the “eyes open” area before the mystery “it” kid can get to them. Watching them play together, stumbling around and giggling, I am grateful to have students back in school.

However, I cannot push the reality of our new educational situation from my mind. Last year was hard for students—and teachers. This year is harder.

The COVID pandemic began as I was completing work to obtain my Master’s in Education in the spring of 2020. Emboldened by a childhood enthusiasm for diseases, I decided I would use the pandemic as the context for my thesis project. This was during the first part of the pandemic when it was all still a bit exciting. And, frankly, because I didn’t understand what it meant to be in a pandemic—I had a lot to learn.

I wanted to know what it was that impacted parent choice—how did parents formulate educational decisions for their children in an era when the choices offered were unclear,

unpredictable, and everything felt much unknown? Originally, I thought the six months that I conducted interviews (July 2020 – December 2020) were going to cover a major portion of the pandemic.

That was a year ago.

The parents who participated were mothers, but this was not on purpose; these participants volunteered. The project began with a series of guiding questions to gather information about their households and lives; how they were coping—juggling their lives while also managing the education of their children. After six months of interviews, and hours of recordings later, the mothers—rather predictably with the exception of a select few—were found to be working extremely hard and were extremely tired.

Education looked very different last year at this time. When school opened in the fall of 2020, our district’s mitigation plan relied heavily on social distancing, masking, and a tiered risk-level approach. This sent teachers and students home to work remotely if the infection rate was too high. The mitigation plan was based on protocols set by the state (similar to many states nationwide). For parents that had to navigate inflexible work schedules, this was a particular challenge.

One parent, who manages a daycare, whose husband is in the Coast Guard, and who has her own three school-aged kids at home, responded, “Right now, school work is happening after daycare. Which is really hard. I get done and I’m ready to help and then he is asleep or everybody’s hungry. So, I am exhausted because I have had to pick up more hours because of COVID. I used to be open from 7 am -5:30 pm. And now my first kid comes at 5:30 am and my last kid leaves at 8 pm. And I have been open on weekends. So some weeks I am working seven days a week” (Oct. 2020).

This year, while school districts have made mitigation plans more accommodating for working parents, they have simultaneously increased

the chances that children will be sent home to quarantine as “close-contacts” by removing mask-mandates and other mitigation strategies. Thus, not only placing additional pressure on teachers, but also reversing any alleviation of stress on the parents they were hoping to support. All the while, putting families and educators at additional risk of infection

This year the district ordered that all schools go “back to normal.” As a result, students are scattered around classrooms trying to maximize the area. Some are wearing masks; some are not. Nevertheless, there is no way to individually space kids out so that they are not considered close contacts in the event of a positive case in a classroom. Especially, if they are not all consistently wearing masks.

Last fall, parents felt the pressure of managing businesses while keeping their kids at home and in some cases trying to coordinate with Special Ed staff in order to address IEP concerns. Some parents—in an effort to create study spaces—cut out boxes as dividers so their kids would have space to do work without interference from siblings. This is an instance of hard-working people turning even more resourceful in a time of need.

Unfortunately, the resources, support, and flexibility that was available to families and schools last year can no longer be depended on. It now feels very much like we—teachers—are fighting this on our own. Even more harrowing—that we are fighting against the very communities we are trying to support.

Throughout the timeline of this project, in spite of the fact that there was a pandemic raging through our world, there was a hopeful sense that education might innovate—getting a much needed makeover with all the systems required to not only successfully implement dual platforms simultaneously, but also to gain nuance and forward-thinking that rural education—along with education in all spaces—desperately needs if it is to thrive in the future.

This is not what happened.

Let’s go back to the first summer after the pandemic started. The pressures of working while assisting kids with remote school increased as we continued remote learning into the fall of 2020. The stories told by the participants were not extraordinary or unusual. They mirrored what many families were going through.

“Yes. It’s been gradual. I really noticed it the week before Thanksgiving break . . . For my daughter, she really misses having a relationship with her teachers. That relationship is always really important to her . . . She loved school. She is a very enthusiastic student. She will get it done. But I see a lack of caring about the quality of her work . . . It’s gonna be like a year of summer, getting them to get back to go to school” (December 2020).

Teachers had to figure out how to quarantine their children while also doing their job. This included facilitating education for their own children, after contract hours, well into the evening. A particularly challenging logistical (and mental and emotional) feat for single mothers.

It was especially challenging for low-income families, for those with less flexible work schedules, or for families with younger children. These challenges—exacerbated by a year of remote learning in inconsistent home-learning conditions—are still with us. These challenges will echo into our students’ future, and our future workforce, if we do not actively choose to reform our schools: closing gaps in equity and providing better access to quality education for all.

Indeed, not all parents fared poorly last year. Some people preferred the flexibility in their households: “I actually have her going to a tutor’s house. She goes there every day for the whole day. And she teaches them all their curriculum, which has been just amazing . . . So my two kids [who are homeschooled] have it really well . . . So for my son he has a teacher that comes in three days a week. Mostly just tutors

him on reading and visualizing and things like that. He is doing excellent” (November 2020).

Parents differed in how they fared depending on the age of their children and resources available in their households. COVID, like cholera, and so many other diseases before it, is a social pandemic as well as a viral one.

One parent summarized many of the factors impacting some families more than others, “Well, ya know, I think that we were lucky because we have done different deliveries of school previously . . . We have homeschooled before, public school, we had a child we sent to private school. So we are flexible enough. But honestly . . . I don’t know if I could do this without a child who was in a higher grade . . . I think there are a lot of socioeconomic differences that make it really challenging for some families and a lot of kids get lost” (November 2020).

The social impacts of this virus have disproportionately affected certain populations and deepened fissures of inequality in our communities. The effects of COVID last year reverberated in classrooms this year. You can see test scores slipping, and more and more time spent on social and emotional learning—re-teaching many students how to interact in socially appropriate ways. Furthermore, you see teachers leaving in droves.

There is incredible pressure to get students caught up and “back to normal.” Meanwhile, there is a magnifying lens on education. An expectation that teachers should be able to raise a phoenix from ashes.

This pandemic has brought it all to the surface. We cannot un-see the gaps in education after this year. It is nearly impossible to teach to the standards, meet the current social and emotional needs of students, and single-handedly invigorate education. Even if you are the most positive educator in the world—one wonders, in the far recesses of the brain, if these kids are going to make it.

In short, we cannot do this alone.

## October 11, 2021:

The first quarter ends next Friday. There are about eight school weeks in a quarter, but I have only had a consistent class for the last three. Since there are no mask requirements, students sitting within six feet of each other for any extended time—aggregated 15 minutes throughout the school day—are sent home if a student tests positive.

For a couple weeks, I operated with seven children in class. Functioning without a hybrid option, “close-contact” kids went home with their Chromebooks, and depending on their grade level, whatever work they could manage.

Many students, especially those with siblings or parents who were sick, were absent for most of the first quarter. This is 25% of their school year. During the last week of the first quarter, I finally got all my students back into class together after a series of quarantines.

Last year was hard because we, as teachers, were doing multiple jobs—we were training ourselves while teaching, and, as a result, were emotionally drained. This year is harder, because all of the planning and resources for “COVID School” are no longer in place to support us in our jobs. However, we are still battling the impact of COVID on our schools, communities, and selves.

The recommendations for how to uplift families based on evidence collected from this project converge with those that support local institutions and public education in general. Throughout the scope of this project, and during the process of reflection, this pandemic has forced to the surface some hard realities of education that community members, parents, constituents, and taxpayers will need to contend with if they are interested in preserving the great equalizer of our nation, and our most unifying public institution: public schools.

Educators and families need to see leadership make decisions that stabilize classrooms and retain teachers. We need to address this moment of cultural decision-making. We need to decide who we want to be as a community, state, and nation. We need to make this choice every day. We need to choose to support mothers, fund early education, and elect policy officials who will make living in rural spaces a viable option for families—and not just create beautiful spaces and communities for those who can afford to reach such economic echelons.

The parents who suffered the most during this pandemic are the people we need to be lifting up the most. We need to ensure that they have opportunities for growth in our towns. They are the people working in the background—those keeping our small communities alive.

We need to choose to cultivate an educated and healthy population over capital gains. Until we are ready to make that choice and address the current destabilization of our towns, we will be gambling with our communities' futures. And when will we decide to truly value mothers?

Are we willing to address the connectedness between a healthy student population and a robust national workforce? Are we ready to confront the fact that education is an investment in our society—and that if we do not make these choices carefully, we risk losing everything?

## **Mouse on Ground**

Navigating the pandemic has felt a lot like Mouse on Ground.

Last year we played with our eyes closed, and we were all figuring out the limitations of our new environment as we worked. This year, our eyes are open, but our hands are tied. We teachers are daunted by the task of constantly defending ourselves and our families from COVID—and from decisions handed down from above.

This year I am grateful to be back at school and working with a classroom of kids. I know we all are. I hope that, in five years, we are still here, working hard at what we do. I hope that things are better.

I hope that we do not wait for things to get worse before we act to retain professionals and support families that make this place home. The insight gained from the project was invaluable in understanding how parents were making choices, how they were affected, and how they coped during the fall of 2020.

My new question is: how will these families continue to hang on?