



An encouraging interview on the rapid switch from classroom learning to online at home.

In this interview, Jenni Johnson, K12 Principal at Hope International School, Beijing, China, reflects on how things have gone transitioning their medium sized school from classroom-based to online learning at home. She begins with a personal word of encouragement to other leaders making that transition right now. Tim Shuman, Regional Director for International Schools, ACSI Global. 20 March 2020.

To hear a separate podcast interview with Jenni [visit this page](#).

First, I'd like to offer an encouragement to all of my fellow school leaders who are faced leading in these uncharted waters. For us, it happened so fast we barely had time to think. There was so little time to make a comprehensive plan. There were many sleepless nights and worries about how this would affect student learning, enrollment, and teacher wellness. But we started. Unprepared. And so can you.

The best thing I can offer eight weeks into e-learning is that it's not all bad and this too shall pass. We are still faced with uncertainty. We don't yet know how long this will last. But students can learn. Even in the present situation. Focus on learning, even if it's slow and in smaller bite-sized amounts, and make the health and wellness of all of your stakeholders your top priority. That starts with you. Model to your people taking good care of yourself. Give them a framework to follow. You will make it. You will be fine. Life will go on. It may look differently, and there will be disappointments, stress, and loss to grieve. God knew you'd be part of your school's leadership for such a time as this. Take the appointment as a compliment and a challenge.

When did traditional classroom instruction end? How many weeks has it been so far? Do you have any idea when you will be able to return to classroom instruction? Did you start from nothing or did you already have some plans in place?

We were on Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday in late January when we found out we would not be able to return to school on the 5th as planned. We had hoped to be back in school sometime in February. Here we are with no return date, assuming the earliest we might be back being sometime in April. Because we were on holiday, we had staff and students peppered around the globe. People were trapped with no resources, no textbooks, no laptops. Also, many websites are blocked in China. So we had to develop a plan with all of those limitations in mind. We focused on our benchmarks, housed on Curriculum Trak, and made new units with the resources we had available for each class. Our staff rallied and we started our e-learning program on February 6th. We started with online safety training and then program training for staff. Because we didn't have time to do student training and the majority of our parents don't speak English, we appointed family liaisons to help our youngest members figure out how to maneuver the platforms.

We had to close school last year between the semesters for 2 weeks, unplanned, and we were not prepared. We made a lot of mistakes, such as giving too much work, work that was too easy, work that was too hard, videos kids couldn't access because they're blocked, expecting students to teach

themselves, or for parents to basically homeschool. We went into e-learning with those mistakes in full view.

How fast were you able to launch elearning? What have you learned from the startup phase? What were any technological challenges to overcome? Did all households have necessary equipment to join in?

What I wished I had known then was the parent, student, and teacher views of each of the platforms we chose. Every view is different from the other, and even within one account, the view is different depending on if you're using a phone or laptop, or even what kind of phone you're using. That makes troubleshooting difficult.

You have to remember, we didn't have a budget for this, so we had to go with free platforms that would work in China. We chose ClassDojo for elementary (and have continued with this over SeeSaw because of the translate function; in the States, I would probably go with SeeSaw) and Edmodo for secondary. I know others are using Moodle, Google classrooms, and Canvas. Those just weren't options for us.

I've said this over and over and it's the one and best thing I have to offer to those in the startup phase: You MUST consider the health and wellness of your entire stakeholder body. Member care is key. Our philosophy for e-learning is based around three concepts: patience, flexibility, and grace. All decisions are filtered through those core values in this.

What platforms did you utilize first? Have you made any changes since the startup? What adjustments had to be made? What are some things you wish you had thought of sooner for a better start? How have the very youngest learners done during this transition?

Not all of our families have reliable internet and devices are being shared by multiple family members. This is especially true for my teachers with kids in the school. The stress has been a big burden on them. I can't imagine how difficult this will be for administrators in school districts with limited internet access at home. I'd say pray for wisdom and make all of your decisions from within your philosophy of e-learning. Go slow. Focus on the non-negotiable benchmarks and re-align curricular expectations for your staff. They won't know to do that on their own. They need leadership to set those parameters.

We utilize Zoom as much as possible. But again, I have to keep reminding our faculty that Zoom is a tool, not our learning platform. It's frustrating for staff when kids don't attend live calls. They care so deeply about their students' learning. Grace. Flexibility. Patience.

What does the teaching and learning look like now...is it video based, chat based, all of the above? Did you use a product/provider?

We encourage but don't require live calls. Teachers are expected to record all Zoom calls that contain content and make those available for students. Not every class meets live every day. We are fortunate that most of our teachers and students are either in China or Korea. But we do have staff and students in other time zones. That has to be considered.

How do you foster Christian community in this phase? How does the second grade teacher or the high school teacher care for her students? How do you keep your staff and faculty feeling connected and united?

Every morning at 7:30am Beijing Time, we meet for our daily devotion via Zoom...just like we always have. We do Zoom assemblies for elementary and secondary on Wednesdays...just like we always have. We still have staff and committee meetings. I put all of my teachers into teams and on days with no staff meetings, I ask the teams to meet for 30 minutes to close their day. That time can be spent praying, asking “shop” questions, just talking about how their day went, etc. It also serves as a “close” for the day. I have to tell my teachers over and over: turn it off. Stop. Leave it until tomorrow. Don’t burn out.

With some teachers scattered abroad, are there any time zone issues to work through?

We have created support teams to assist with this. We have one teacher in South Africa. It is very hard for her. She’s been a trooper and kept Beijing time as we had asked her to do thinking it was only going to last a few weeks. Last week we relieved her of many of her teaching duties to alleviate some pressure. I’m teaching G2 math for the first time. It’s so fun!

What has been the biggest challenge?

I would say managing emotions. The pressure and stress of all of this is overwhelming. And not just the e-learning stress (which is very real), but all of it—fear over getting the virus, disappointment in plans changing—we just lost our family trip to London in May. My seniors lost their senior trip, the spring sports seasons have been cancelled, spring concerts are most likely not going to happen...I have seniors in orchestra who may never play together again, and now we’re planning for two graduation scenarios—one on campus, one via Zoom. There’s also the family stress of being cooped up together. Our church’s crisis line has gotten a lot calls related to marriage issues and potential divorces since this started. Strife in the home is real. Some kids may not have access to the best home environment and in some parts of the world, healthy meals for breakfast and lunch will disappear during school closures.

I’ve cried a lot. Ran a lot on my treadmill. Eaten too much chips and salsa. But my face to my teachers (at least I hope) is one of calm and positivity. Staying positive is so important. I tell them right now what’s more important than what you teach, is how you teach. Students will be telling their grandkids about this experience. What do you hope they remember?

What has been the easiest or most surprising thing?

Comfy clothes! One day I walked outside and it was suddenly spring! I didn’t have to fight the worst days of winter outside this year. My family has gotten to spend a lot more time together and do things we’ve never done before: planted tomatoes indoors, picked up chess again, watched American Idol, put puzzles together. And I have teenage boys, by the way!

What about your non-teaching staff and support roles?

They are helping in specific ways such as tutoring struggling students, offering technical support for the platforms, helping me hold teachers accountable for the policies we’ve put in place. Several of our support staff are listed as “teachers” in each class to help with this. HR is still busy working on visas and screening potential new hires. The facilities personnel are still going on campus twice/week to deep clean and disinfect. No disengaged student has been left alone. Our task force calls parents and checks up on them frequently.

How does the Guidance Counselor fulfill their duty during this time? ESL? Tutors? Support?

Our Guidance Counselor is amazing. She’s not missed a beat. Students are still on track for college applications. She is also working closely with College Board to figure out how to do AP exams. Our ESL teachers are LOVING e-learning. They have access to all of the Dojo and Edmodo class materials and can tailor lessons for their students like never before. They’re offering additional Zoom classes and parents are very happy.

What kind of concerns should leaders anticipate now from the home community?

"I am not a teacher." Parents will make statements like, "It took us 2 hours to finish all of the work!" And you'll be thinking: "We teach them from 8:00-3:00, are you kidding me?!" Be patient with parents too. I equate it to dentistry. I can't pull my kids' teeth; why should I expect my parents to be able to teach their kids trig or split infinitives. Remember teaching is a calling and a gift. Don't look down on parents who don't have the same gifts as you.

Are there any child-safety issues that you have had to consider as you launched elearning?

Yes, we considered online safety as a big issue to address. We provided training before we started. We also have Zoom call guidelines so teachers and students aren't alone on a video call.

Can you share with us some of the most creative instructional things you've seen done by your teachers?

Our PreK teacher made learning videos in the park that were so cute. Teachers are thinking outside of the box for ways for students to demonstrate learning, like videos and skits, instead of traditional quizzes and tests. Since you have to think about the cheating issue, you have to change how students demonstrate learning.

Can you tell us one or two brief inspirational stories that have emerged from this challenging time?

I'll share these quotes from some of our students we recently surveyed:

- During this e-learning time, I have realized that teachers have been facing difficulties as students with new learning system, and they try their best to help us with our studies at home. (G12)
- I feel sorry for my homeroom teacher because she has to look at her laptop all the time. There are 20 students in our class, and she needs to check each student's work. She is also pregnant now. It must be hard for her to work and take care of herself. (G3)
- It is kind of a childish thinking, but I always thought that teachers are good at everything. However, after we start our e-learning, I realized that teachers also have things that are new to them. Our school haven't done any e-learning program before, so teachers had to learn how to do things online with the students. It is an obvious thing, but I did not expect that. (G12)

The common thread that impresses me is that they see learning modeled from their teachers and they care about the well-being of their teachers as well. Kids are so amazing.

Comment on the level of stress that leadership has carried. How do you care for one another?

I am comforted by the words of Stonewall Jackson, "Captain, my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me."

And those of CS Lewis, "If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds."

Lead by example. And when you need to cry, cry. When you need to take a nap, take a nap. Outdo one another showing honor, and kindness, and love. I created videos on PowToon and cards on Canva during my down time to share with staff. Be the chief encourager.

What about the stress level on teachers? How do you support them?

We designed a framework for wellness that included creating a daily routine, encouraging finding a new hobby, working out, bathing, taking care of personal hygiene, getting outside for fresh air, and unplugging from devices, news, and social media. Sometimes they just need to hear you say the words. Give your teachers permission to set up boundaries.

Also, help create with them some essential agreements and best practices for e-learning that will take away some of the potential stressors. For example, no group projects. As a school leader you'll think of things and the potential problems that can happen one step ahead of your teachers, so be proactive and thus protect them from angry students and parents.

What would you say to teachers who are about to be asked to move to online learning?

You. Can. Do. This. You are the lead learner in your classroom. Get ready for some effortful learning. Consider it PD you didn't have to travel or pay for! Ask for help. Help your peers when they need it. Collaboration is so very important in times like this.

What about your finance and your IT teams?

They continue to work from home. They are allowed to go on campus if they must. Marketing and advancement also continue to meet and plan for the future. This pandemic WILL end. Be ready. Consider the bridesmaids and their oil. Have oil in your lamps for whatever God has next for your school.

What about your facilities? How are they being cared for? Security?

We still have 24 hour security and bi-weekly cleaning.

It might be too early to tell, but is there anything that you might keep from this entire experience once school opens up again?

Definitely yes! The weekly learning plans teachers submit to me are creating a culture of preparedness we didn't have so acutely before. We now have every single student and parent on Edmodo and Dojo and have that as a resource that will continue to support learning after we go back to campus. Zoom has probably forever changed the way we'll do meetings and PDs.

What is the silver lining in this entire process?

I am 100% convinced I work at the best school on the planet in the history of all schools. My prayer is that each administrator will feel the same way about their own school. I could not have asked for a better staff do e-learning with. We are not perfect. We don't agree on everything. We frustrate each other. But we love each other. And we love the kids. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I appreciate my people more than ever.

If you have time please list some of the most helpful resources that you and your team have used.

- Edmodo
- ClassDojo
- School email
- Curriculum Trak
- Zoom
- Loom
- BrainPop/Brain Pop, Jr.
- SplashMath
- RazKids
- PowerSchool

- Teachers Pay Teachers
- PowToon
- Canvas