

Interview with Jeff Heyck-Williams, Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Two Rivers Public Charter School, Washington, DC May 2020

About This Interview

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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We got a good sense that we were going to close probably at the beginning of March. But by the end of February, we were starting to talk about it, because we knew it was imminent. We spent those first two weeks in March, when we were still in person, coming up with a plan for distance learning.

At that point, we thought we might be closed for a couple of weeks. We didn't know what to expect, really. So we had our elementary-grade teachers create packets to go home with kids. We have one-to-one computing in our middle school. So, our middle school came up with an online option on March 11. And we have one-to-one computing in fourth and fifth grades as well....We amped up because we had a sense that we were going to close sooner than we thought. This was March 11, which was a Wednesday.

In two days, we surveyed all of our families about tech needs and ramped up the production of those packets. On March 13, the last day we were in school with students, we sent packets home with kids. We also sent lots of computers home with kids.

That was how we started our journey. And we thought we were going to be closed maybe to the end of April. Then, two weeks later, the mayor announced that we were going to be closed for the rest of the year. We realized that we needed to ramp up our digital and remote learning. So, we created what we call Digital Remote Learning 2.0, which had a more elaborate set of schedules for our elementary schools and new plans to distribute more technology to all of our students.

In designing the 2.0 plan, we started with, “In an ideal world, what do we want to actually accomplish and what do we want this to look like?” We came up with the three values as our guiding principles: connection, core content, and curiosity/creativity. We asked, “How do we help foster those three outcomes with kids in this space?”

Technology-wise, we’re ensuring our kids have the technology and internet access. The city has had to really ramp up internet access because, prior to this, we have not had general Wi-Fi across Washington, DC. Trying to make sure that everybody has Wi-Fi was a big hurdle that we are still working with the city around, but over 90% of our families now have something. *(By mid-May, just after our conversation, Two Rivers was able to get hot spots to all of their families.)*

JS: How is it going to be different? Because, this is the first time that I remember.

JH-W: Yeah. So, we started with that survey before our school closed that was electronic and through phone calls. When parents were picking kids up on that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday right before we closed, we surveyed them to make sure that they were on the list and had been contacted.

We’ve done two additional parent surveys since we’ve closed to get information. In both of those cases, we’ve set up phone banks. Anybody, any family, for whatever reason, that seems to not be responding to email or through their kids, we’re trying to connect with in other ways.

JS: What is it like to have these things? It’s a little bit different, right?

JH-W: We have 900 students. There are seven students that we have only had contact with two or three times. With the other students, we have been in contact multiple times on a weekly basis.

JS: A lot.

JH-W: Oh, it is. It’s exhausting. When you are in person and can be with everybody, you can ask everybody to come to the same place to connect with them. The

virtual connection is something different. We can create some spaces, like morning meeting spaces where students come and gather, which are probably the biggest gathering spots online. We have those between three to five times a week depending on the age of the kid. We are...getting about 90% of our students, depending on the class, to come to those regularly. It's connection, right? One of our values.

But, it's with those 10 to 15% or so in a class that don't show up regularly that we have to reach out to individually. I think that's probably the hardest piece. We're mindful of the fact that our teachers, like our parents, have domestic stuff that they have to work on as well. They have people they're caring for at home. Everybody's life is different. But nobody has as much time as we did when we were in school together. So, it's just trying to find the right balance of time and expectations for how much people can make those connections.

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JH-W: Yeah. So, I'll be honest, we're not doing this. I think part of it is tailoring some expectations and one of the biggest expectations is connection. We care about connection. We care about those relational components of learning, the nurturing and growth of our kids. And that that was the number one priority.

Actually, that was the number two priority. The number one priority was making sure that all of our kids were safe and fed. So that is a whole separate bucket of things we have been working on. Making sure that that was done, that our kids were safe and fed. Then making sure that every kid was getting those personal connections—that somehow the personal connections were happening—more than just sporadically or once a week, but regular routines of connection. Setting that up and letting everybody know what those expectations were. It wasn't going to be the same, it was tailoring the expectation, but it was an expectation.

Then on the technical side, we bought zoom accounts and then had a PD day. We trained our teachers around how to run their morning meetings, community meetings, or crew meetings online. One great thing about Zoom is the teacher can meet with them, but learning etiquette and norms around being on a whole school or classroom meeting was a big piece. Part of that is helping teachers learn how to manage that. For instance, our elementary classrooms have a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. The assistant teachers can help manage the zoom account while the teachers are running a meeting or vice versa.

Also, we had to learn important stuff, like how to virtually allow kids to talk with each other, to just interact with other kids, and what kinds of initiatives really keep the connection and help kids normalize what is abnormal times for them. That goes from our littlest kids all the way to our oldest kids. That didn't happen overnight. That just has had to shift over time.

The one thing I will say is that our fourth grade and up kids are pretty tech savvy. They've used technology for project management and have been using tools like Google classroom regularly. So, this transition has been less bumpy, particularly for our middle schoolers, because they know where to find the tools and use them. The technology was enhancing to their work before and now it is more what they are doing, rather than just an enhancement.

JS: I think it's important to have that connection. You know, that's the thing that we're trying to do. We're trying to make sure that we're not just giving them the tools, but we're also making sure that they're using them in a way that's meaningful.

JH-W: Yeah, I live in Virginia and one of the things that I've talked with some of my colleagues about is that, in Virginia, we knew we were closed for the rest of the year by the end of March. DC slowly extended the closure and finally made that decision in the middle of April. It has felt harder on our school community than it did for my kids. My kids are still angry and sad and frustrated that they can't see their friends and they can't go out and play soccer, but we've had this period of grief.

That felt more protracted with the Two Rivers community, partially because we thought maybe there was some hope that we were going to go back to school before the end of the school year. It took a while for people to realize that we weren't going back. I have seen that from students to staff to administrators. Everybody is mourning that loss. But I think it did feel like a bigger loss because there was more hope for a few weeks.

On the technology side of things, really it was a challenge for our kindergarten and Pre-K teachers. We don't typically have our three- and four-year olds on the screen more than a couple of times a week during school. Some of those teachers are very tech savvy and some of them less so. So, trying to figure out how to translate what they do to a virtual environment has been really challenging. But, we have one Pre-K teacher who said, "We get together with the kids and say, 'Alright, so what are we playing today?'" Once again, it is about connecting.

My eight-year-old said to me the other day, "You know, adults can go get on zoom and talk. We don't do the that. I don't know what to say when we get on a call. When we get together, we just play."

I think that that's really a big part of it, figuring out how to engage kids in meaningful interaction. Any meaningful interaction through this kind of platform is

challenging—finding ways that kids can be their full, authentic selves and have, once again, that sense of normalcy. I think our teachers, for the most part have embraced that challenge.

I have a great team that works for me. I have two instructional guides and they both have been really thoughtful about meeting one-on-one with teachers to help them with technological troubleshooting. They've lots of experience coaching teachers in the past, but it is really different coaching teachers in this kind of environment, obviously, because it's really about how to get online and connect with kids.

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JH-W: I think that we're still navigating that, but I will say that we've backed off a

“We’re going to keep giving kids experiences with math and reading and experience around helping them create things.” Those are still high expectations, but it’s not particularly high compared to what we were trying to do before.

Another challenge is we are providing something and it’s hard to tell what students are completely getting out of it. One of the conversations I’ve been having with our chief academic officer is how do we evaluate how we’re doing. And we don’t have a good answer for that right now.

JS: So it is 12 15? This is the one that is the most important. How do we know?

JH-W: Yes, absolutely. Starting over, but this time with a lot more kids and what feels like a lot more challenging environments.

JS: Yes, that’s right, but this time with a lot more kids and what feels like a lot more challenging environments. It depends on the teacher.

JH-W: Um, no. So, here’s what we are doing. We’re doing a variety of different kinds of what I would call projects, but they’re more open-ended projects for students. It depends on the teacher.

There’s lots of interesting ways that content is being delivered to good effect. We have one teacher who’s doing Geology experiments from her kitchen. You can share a video or there’s a bunch of museums now that have open exploration offerings where you can do a virtual tour of certain exhibits of museums. Our teachers are accessing resources like that.

And then I have another a fifth-grade teacher who has her Genius Hour that is open exploration where kids choose topics. They have an advisor that is one of our other fifth grade teachers, that they meet with weekly to talk through where they are with their project. The major parameter around the project is that they have to synthesize their learning around some topic, and then they have to create some kind of presentation.

Those two pieces are the expectations around the project element that we’ve kept—the kids are synthesizing learning around some content or information and then they present it. That may be our preschoolers, drawing a picture and talking to their teacher on a zoom call about it, showing them the picture. Or it may be a kid creating a video using one of the video apps. There’s a range or a large variety of different things that kids might do with that. Where in the past, we would have driven probably for deeper content knowledge and more of a writing component.

We've let that the writing piece go a little bit, although some, I think in our middle school, they are still asking all of their students to have a written reflection piece with their synthesis.

JS: So it's not like, "This is the only way to do it." It's like, "Here are some options. How do you think about this? How do you think about this? How do you think about this?"

JH-W: Yeah, that's the million-dollar question, How do we know if what we are doing is effective or not? How do we know where any individual kid is and what they are doing?

First, I can talk about some of the bright spots. I feel like one of those things is the Genius Hour—having a teacher connect one-on-one with a kid. This works as a good assessment because that teacher can have a good idea of what a kid knows and what a kid has been doing, because they're having a conversation. In the Genius Hour, it's around a topic that the kid chooses, so there's some motivation there. And then the teacher can help troubleshoot—like asking "What are ways for you to deepen your knowledge, and then what are ways for you to share your knowledge?" Those are the two strands that we're hoping the kids take up and grow and develop.

Second, state testing has been canceled everywhere. Hallelujah. And as a network we are still looking at whether there are any network-level assessments to give. I think the answer is probably not until the fall. That's where we are currently. We're not doing performance assessment right now.

We are pushing out some course-based assessments in our middle school through Edulastic, which is more like a traditional kind of test. Our middle school math program is through Carnegie Learning (<https://www.carnegielearning.com>) and they embed Edulastic assessments (<https://edulastic.com>) into their online platform. So, we've used Edulastic to build out math literacy. They have question banks and, in the case of Carnegie Learning, they have the actual assessments that Carnegie built into their assessment tool, but then you can also create your own questions.

JS: This is a really good question. It's a really good question. It's a really good question.

JH-W: Oh, absolutely. We use assessment data in so many different ways that we're thinking about what the biggest levers are and the things that we actually need data for right now. A big one is: How effective is what we're doing? The other is: Where do we go from here with our kids? This is the assessment for learning piece. How do we help chart a path forward?

For instance, what is next year going to look like? Or what is the summer going to look like? That's where we are hoping these Edulastic assessment tools are going to give us something to start with. They're not the same as the NWA map assessment (<https://www.nwea.org/map-growth>) we normally use as part of our

So, how do we hold on to a vision in which we create schools that are an important part of creating a more just and equal society. Hopefully we can continue to drive towards that. I think that we can. I know that it's going to be really challenging. But, working in this field and at Two Rivers in this community, I feel like we have had some success, and I feel like we will in the future as well. That really does mean holding on to your core values and not turning away from those.

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