

A typical day in atypical times

How two Rochester-area teachers are coping with the sudden separation from their students

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Spencerport High School teacher Kim McLean sat down at her kitchen table and pulled up her lesson plan for Newton's Law of Cooling, an extralarge Spencerport Rangers coffee mug at her side.

One by one, her honors-level Algebra 2 students popped up on her computer screen. Some were showered and neatly dressed, others still rumpled from sleep. Siblings, parents and pets paced behind them. They greeted her, then hit the mute button, waiting for class to begin.

To McLean's right, just out of view, her own two young boys worked quietly on a Lego challenge for their own classwork. She took a sip from her mug and sighed.

"This is almost like normal," she said into her laptop. "I love seeing you guys."

Learning adaptations

Across New York, teachers faced with an unprecedented separation from their schools and students due to COVID-19 have been thinking up ways to get as close to normal as possible. It varies by district and student resources, grade level and the style of individual educators.

East High School chemistry teacher Gavin Jenkins opened a Zoom chat to show an array of beakers on his kitchen counter. The assignment was to create a lava lamp, then figure out what made it work.



Gavin Jenkins, a science teacher at East High School, does an experiment from his kitchen and broadcasts online to his students. Jenkins tries to help his students keep engaged while the coronavirus keeps schools closed. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Kim McLean shares her computer screen during an online math class from her house.

Unlike McLean’s remote class, none of Jenkins’ students tuned in live. Many work at Wegmans and have picked up extra shifts, or were caring for siblings at home.

Instead, he posts the videos to his Google classroom site, where students access them — and send him their work and questions — from early in the morning until late at night.

That arrangement, where students and teachers are not necessarily connecting at the same moment, is known in education parlance as asynchronous learning.

It already has been gaining in currency in recent years, particularly in colleges and universities, but now is becoming a favored coronavirus classroom adaptation.

Jenkins was joined remotely at the beginning of his lesson by Amy Agnitti, a special education teacher who usually comes into his classroom to work with certain students.

He started the lesson with a cringeworthy periodic table meme: “In my opinion, all the good chemistry jokes argon.” But he also shares resources for where students can access food or other things they might need with school out of session.

“I’ve definitely formed really awesome relationships with my kids this year at school,” Jenkins said. “We have fun handshakes when the kids walk into the room and things like that, so I’ve tried to keep that going however possible.”

Changing schedules

Teachers no longer have to worry about covering study halls, preparing for most state exams or handling extracurricular responsibilities. Yet

McLean said her days now are busier than ever.

For one thing, she’s the de facto teacher for her two younger children in addition to her 100 or so math students. Her friends and neighbors call her, too, for help with their children’s math work.

“I swear I’m doing math all day,” she said.

Contact with students has also greatly expanded. McLean speaks with them via text message, phone call, video call and email, as well as through Schoology, one of several education platforms.

Jenkins has weekly video conferences with a teacher mentor and has been using the Rochester City School District’s online professional learning resources. He’s also working toward a certification through Google’s education platform.

He, too, hears at all hours from students — and from parents, some of whom have complained good-naturedly about the messes his experiments make in the kitchen.

The lava lamps weren’t too much of a mess, assuming the young chemists didn’t go too heavy on the baking soda. He turned off his video recorder after about 20 minutes, but not without a parting message for his students.

“Ms. Agnitti and all of us at East miss you a lot and we’re looking forward to seeing you again,” he said. “In the meantime, keep reaching out via email or however else.”

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.