

Family works hard as 5 learn at home

LEARNING CURVE

Rochester's Sepulvedas are solution makers

Adria R. Walker and Shawn Dowd

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Note: This story is part of the third installment of Learning Curve, a yearlong series of stories following six families whose children are attending public schools across New York state during the pandemic. Start from the beginning here.

The distractions came first. Then the missing assignments.

Ten-year-old Jacob Sepulveda needed to focus on his virtual learning. And his mom had the solution.

Zumarie moved Jacob from the main table where his older siblings work — but not so far that he's totally isolated. His new workspace, complete with lamp and headphones, separates him from his four brothers and sisters by using a large room divider that's decorated with images of New York City: a city street, the Statue of Liberty, an American flag.

Above him are math times tables, his Zoom class schedule and images of his family — a reminder, perhaps, that he's not in this alone. Like many families coping with remote learning this year, the Sepulvedas face challenges, but Zumarie and husband Reinaldo are not quitters.

They're solution makers.

(Not) returning to in-person learning

The Rochester City School District announced reopening plans and has already started accepting some students for in-person learning, but Zumarie is firmly against sending her children back for in-person classes.

one teacher that he texts even on the weekend, holidays and she's still going to help him. It could be 7 and Jacob is texting her, 'I gotta do this assignment, could you please help me?' and she is like, 'Yes, let's get in a Zoom meeting, let's do this, let's do that.'" Middle children Rihanna, 12, and Jeremiah, 13, both made honor roll during the first marking period. They're continuing to do well in their classes. Eldest children Reina, 16, and Reinaldo, 14, are still struggling with some classes. They're managing to stay afloat, but there are still challenges.

The kids would love to go back to school — Reina wants to play volleyball; Reinaldo, soccer — but they understand their mother's concerns.

"I understand that my kids are struggling with school, and school is my first priority, but their safety goes above school," Zumarie said. "I prefer my kids to work with me here. I prefer to keep struggling along with them, than sending them to school and letting them get sick."

They're safer at home, Zumarie says, and one thing is certain: The Sepulveda kids know that even when remote schooling feels impossible, Mom and Dad are right there with them, pushing themselves just as hard.

Adria R. Walker covers public education for the Democrat and Chronicle in partnership with Report for America. Follow her on Twitter at @adriawalkr or send her an email at arwalker@gannett.com. You can support her work with a tax-deductible donation to Report for America.

Even though the vaccine is now available for some people, it is not available for children, nor is it widely accessible, she notes.

“I don’t feel that it’s a safe time for these kids to go back to school, being that the [coronavirus] cases are spiking up instead of decreasing,” she said. “They say school is the safest place, but I don’t think it is.”

Zumarie understands firsthand the frustrations of remote learning: She is in her last semester of obtaining her bachelor’s degree in social work at SUNY Brockport.

During the winter semester, Zumarie said, she reached out to a professor repeatedly and didn’t get a response. She needed help with an assignment and she was concerned about her grade, but wasn’t hearing anything back. When the professor did respond, Zumarie said that their response was both unhelpful and “in a way that sounded like she was frustrated.”

Like many things since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Zumarie’s spring semester was pushed back to early February. But just as she expects her kids to stay focused and busy, she expects the same from herself.

Never one to sit idle, Zumarie used the time to start a business, where she makes T-shirts, picture frame, keychains, cups and other items.

This is in addition to continuing to work at her social work internship, where she was hired per diem.

Husband Reinaldo is still employed full time, too.

“I was like, ‘I gotta do something to keep myself busy and also to provide for us,’” she said.

School experiences

The new learning space has been good for Jacob, but so has the support network his teachers have provided, Zumarie said.

“I have to say he has a group of wonderful teachers helping him out, and I’m so grateful for them,” Zumarie said, adding that they’re responsive to her, too. “There’s



Zumarie Sepulveda listens as her son Jeremiah explains the lessons he just completed for his eighth grade class as she goes around the dining room checking on each of her five children as they continue remote learning at their home in Rochester. PHOTOS BY SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Zumarie Sepulveda listens as her son, ninth grader Reinaldo, talks about his earth science class assignments as she checks on each of her five children before they break for lunch, as remote learning continues on Jan. 14.

