

Coming Out of COVID-19 Stronger

By Brian Mark Zockoll Jr.

Introduction

The Crucible

According to *Education Week*, the coronavirus pandemic “impacted at least 124,000 U.S. public and private schools” ultimately affecting “at least 55.1 million students” (Map, 2020). We remember that impact. Late night school board meetings deciding how best to balance safety and family needs. School doors closing not to reopen. Principals coordinating families, faculty, and staff. Teachers becoming distance educators overnight. The loss of face-to-face interaction with students certainly pained those teachers who began the spring semester in a traditional manner but closed out the year in a distance format. So also did reworking courses, changing expectations, rewriting lesson plans, communicating with frustrated parents and students, and questioning the future. Such adversity drove many educators to their knees.

A Golden Response

In a most straightforward manner, Proverbs 24:10 states that those who “faint in the day of adversity” know their “strength is small.” To gain strength during trials, the Christian must consider what the Bible says about overcoming. James 1 notes that the Christian must bear with patience the trials of difficult times. Part of this forbearance includes prayer, both asking for strength and wisdom and acknowledging in thanksgiving God’s blessing (Jas. 1:5; Phil. 4:6–7). Renewing his mind through patient forbearance, prayer, and worshipful sacrifice will bring about the sort of strength and understanding the Christian needs to be transformed into a more perfect follower of Christ (Rom. 12:1–2). Job is the classic example of these principles applied, stating in his own words, “When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).

Applying the Refining Principles

Having been tried in the COVID cauldron, the Christian school teacher has a responsibility to walk away strengthened. He cannot let this trial pass without seeking out personal and professional refining. As a survey respondent stated, “[COVID-19] challenged me to learn new ways to effectively

deliver high quality content and, in doing so, broadened the tools and methodologies that I will carry into the coming school year.” The information that follows celebrates those victories in pedagogy to encourage others.

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Methodology

The Study

The purpose of this study was to seek out the ways Christian school teachers believed COVID-19 strengthened them. To be included, the respondent must have been working as a Christian school teacher during the COVID-19 crisis. Each completed a Google Form with 14 questions, 5 of which were open ended. Demographic information included the respondent's highest degree completed, tenure, grades taught, and current city and state.

The Teachers

One hundred forty teachers from 20 different U.S. states and Guam responded. Each affirmed his/her status as "a Christian school educator during the COVID-19 crisis." Fifty-five percent held bachelor's, and thirty-nine percent held master's degrees. Eight respondents represented the extremes,

THE KEY TO COMMUNICATION WAS "LOTS AND LOTS MORE EMAILS."

four holding high school degrees and four holding doctorates. Thirty percent (the largest) had been teaching between 6 and 10 years, while 10.7% (the smallest) had been teaching between 15 and 20 years.

Interestingly 64 respondents reported teaching elementary, and 64 others reported teaching senior high students. Only 9 taught preschool.

Stronger in Communication

Communication between all stakeholders during this crisis was paramount for success. Survey responses made it clear that teachers capitalized on the communication structures already in place, along with alternative methods, during the pandemic.

How Communication Took Place

Respondents were provided with an extensive list of possible communication methods and were asked to check all the methods they used to reach *the parents or guardians* of their students. A write-in option was also possible. Of the 140 respondents, 134 checked "email," making it the primary way teachers communicated with parents. In fact, the next two types of communication, "text messaging" and "messaging through the school's learning management system," received only 95 and 94 checks from respondents. Seventy respondents checked "phone calls," and 64 checked "synchronous video conference."

Another check-all-that-apply question mirrored the first in options but concerned *teacher/student* communication. The most often checked response was "synchronous video conference" with 120 checks, and this was the most noteworthy communication method used with students more than parents. The next most utilized method was "email" with 100 checks. (One teacher noted, along with many others, just how meaningful email was during this time, saying the key to

communication was “LOTS AND LOTS more emails.”) Other responses receiving 60 or more checks were “messaging through the school’s learning management system” with 78 and “text messaging” with 65.

Overcoming Obstacles to Communication

Two specific responses are typical of the way in which teachers overcame communication issues during COVID-19. One chose a single word, “Prayer!” Another simply stated, “I kept trying and trying . . .” More specifically though, several themes emerged from written responses concerning overcoming communication barriers. These themes were variety, persistence, and regular check-ins. Though not included here, other lesser themes should be common to all Christian educators, including hard work, creativity, patience, and self-disciplined growth.

Variety

Of the 114 written responses to Question 3, 49 contained some reference to variety in approaching communication. Teachers routinely employed phone calls, emails, text messages, social media, learning management system notifications, synchronous video conferencing systems, and packets to ensure contact. Other creative solutions involved videos created in PowerPoint or another application and posted to YouTube, the Remind app for group messaging, and even home visits conducted appropriately.

WHEN A PARENT WAS NON-RESPONSIVE TO MY PREFERRED METHOD OF COMMUNICATION (EMAIL), I EMPLOYED ANOTHER TYPE OF COMMUNICATION (TEXT) TO ENSURE THAT NECESSARY CONTACT WAS BEING MADE.

Persistence

One response evidenced the second theme of persistence. “When a parent was non-responsive to my preferred method of communication (email), I employed another type of communication (text) to ensure that necessary contact was being made.” More specifically, as another response noted, “I just had to be very persistent and very understanding.” Persistence usually paid off according to another: “When not getting communication back from a student, shifting attempts to other platforms enabled me to eventually make contact.” Teachers recognized the need to keep trying until one system of communication or another worked. One put it this way: “It took much communication. . . . It took a great amount of grace, understanding, and patience working with home situations. I have sent more texts and emails than ever before. Standing on porches talking with parents. Shouting (in a good way) to students through windows.” As it should be, prayer often accompanied these attempts. One summarized many by stating that obstacles were overcome only through “prayer and lots of calls and emails!”

IT TOOK A GREAT AMOUNT OF GRACE, UNDERSTANDING, AND PATIENCE.

Regular Check-Ins

Regular check-ins by teachers encapsulated the final theme. “I sent the same message to parents and students, at 8 a.m. each morning. This was predictable so families knew to look for it.” Some necessitated daily interaction. “I Zoomed daily with my students as a class, which gave them stability and social interaction with their classmates.” Another clung to “routine communication daily as a discipline” to find success. Another found, “Sharing weekly overviews to parents before the week began . . . helped parents to have a better understanding of what was expected of their child so that they could . . . offer better support.” One teacher succinctly noted the how and why: “By establishing a set time weekly for our Zoom meeting and writing exact and explicit instructions for parents, I was able to maintain needed communication.” Regular check-ins led to consistent communication however check-ins occurred.

Stronger in Technology

Much of the inventiveness shown by teachers and demanded by social distancing revolved around technology. Teachers readily explained how COVID-19 made them stronger in their technology usage.

One teacher stated that the pandemic

“forced me to innovate and problem solve creatively in order to promote learning, create a new learning environment, and establish a sense of peace and structure in our classroom culture. It has sharpened my skills in differentiation and utilization of technology.” More pointedly, another stated, “It forced me to abandon what I find most comfortable and embrace new techniques/technology.”

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Growth in Proficiency

Teachers were asked to rate their technological proficiency before and after the crisis. Sixteen rated themselves as “novice” prior while only two rated themselves as “novice” after. Those ranking themselves as “intermediate” also dropped from 66 prior to 28 after. The “proficient” ranking saw the largest change, growing from 48 before to 89 after. Nine claimed “advanced” status prior, while 22 did after. As a properly equipped teacher can construct what is needed to overcome obstacles, these ratings are encouraging.

All Ages Strengthened

Worth noting is the growth recognized by teachers of all ages. No teacher with over 20 years of experience regressed, and over 60% reported having grown at least one

level in proficiency. One respondent moved two steps, from “novice” to “proficient,” and another noted movement from “novice” to “advanced.” One such tenured professional wrote, “I overcame obstacles by spending an unbelievable amount of time learning the Google options available to teachers.” Another

I ZOOMED DAILY WITH MY STUDENTS AS A CLASS, WHICH GAVE THEM STABILITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH THEIR CLASSMATES.

bluntly noted what many probably thought: “It forced me to get out of my rut and explore new avenues of teaching.”

Of course, growth was not just an old man’s game. A rookie’s humble self-evaluation read: “I am a first-year teacher, so I’m still figuring out the best methods for teaching even before COVID. . . . I believe that this pandemic allowed me to experiment with different methods and technology that helped me learn more as a teacher.”

Specific Application Growth

When asked which technologies teachers gained proficiency in during the spring, 122 respondents selected “synchronous video conferencing.” The next most checked option was “the school’s learning management system” (56). Other options included “emailing” (36), “publisher-provided online resources” (26), “text messaging” (18), “social media” (12), and “group text service” (8). A most encouraging theme developed in response to this question was the number of individual applications written in by teachers (see list below).

- CamScanner
- ClassDojo
- Dropbox
- EasyTestMaker
- Edmodo
- Edpuzzle
- Educreations
- Epic
- Explain Everything
- Flipgrid
- Google Classroom
- Google Drive
- Google Forms
- Google Hangout
- Google Slides
- Loom
- Marco Polo
- Microsoft Teams
- Nearpod
- OneDrive
- Screencastify
- Seesaw
- ShowMe
- SpellingCity
- Spellingtraining.com
- XtraMath
- YouTube

Specific Application Usefulness

Question 5 asked teachers specifically to write in the “digital tools, applications, sites” most beneficial to them during COVID-19. Zoom and the Google Suite, including Google Classroom, were the most profitable tools teachers used. However, as was the case prior, the plethora of written-in applications evidenced the level of intent and effort these educators applied ensuring their personal effectiveness. The resources listed below are in addition to those previously given. Not included but often cited were hardware (digital cameras, scanners, computers), extensions, learning management systems, and publisher resources.

- Actively Learn
- Adobe Reader
- Adobe Scan
- Blackbaud
- BrainPOP
- Canvas

- cK-12
- Desmos
- Drama Notebook
- ExamView
- GeoGebra
- GoGuardian
- FaceTime
- Fluency Matters
- forScore
- Happy Numbers
- iMovie
- IXL
- Kahoot!
- Khan Academy
- MathAndScience.com
- Microsoft OneNote
- Movavi
- MusicplayOnline
- Mystery Science
- NoRedInk
- OBS Studio
- PBS LearningMedia
- Pinterest
- PowerPoint
- Quizlet
- ReadWorks
- Scholastic
- Señor Wooly
- Socrative
- Super Teacher Worksheets
- Teachers Pay Teachers
- TED-Ed
- Usborne Quicklinks
- Vocabulary.com
- Webex

Teachers even stated how certain resources best applied to certain content areas.

- “Epic (online books for students to read/keep track of their progress), VocabularySpellingCity (games to practice the weekly spelling list).”
- “As an English teacher the Actively Learn website was fantastic for assigning short stories via the Internet.”
- “I heavily relied on Educreations Pro to provide video explanations of each lesson to my students. This option was best for explaining math concepts without having to convert all the equations to an online form. . . . I was able to incorporate images and diagrams into the whiteboard app that provided a visual interpretation of the individual problems. . . . For making digital content, I used GeoGebra to create my geometry diagrams and Desmos to graph equations. These diagrams were often used in Educreations lessons or on my quizzes that I made in Google Forms. I also used a Google Chrome extension called EquatIO to help with inserting math equations directly into Google Forms.”
- “Educreations—to make whiteboard videos of lessons for math, science, and Bible.”
- “CK-12 is an amazing, free, flexible learning platform for math and science allowing teachers to assign learning modules and generate quizzes/tests for students. The assessments are automatically graded, and extensive details are available about the students’ performance and activity on the assessments. . . . Quizlet is a great platform for helping students with studying when it’s rote learning.”

- “For specific class content, I benefited from SeñorWooly.com, FluencyMatters.com, and StudySpanish.com for my Spanish courses; and vocabulary.com, and NoRedInk.com for my English courses.”
- “As a language teacher I had always wanted to take the time to experiment with video responses to assess speaking. It was always challenging because I had to take so much of my 30-minute class teaching the students how to use the tech. Now that they are proficient in Seesaw and Flipgrid, I definitely plan on using those apps regularly in the classroom to teach digital citizenship and assess speaking goals.”
- “I was also able to use the app forScore to scan in my music, so I had it right at my fingertips during my virtual lessons.”

Flexing New Muscles After COVID-19

Most took the time to write how they would use tools and techniques developed during COVID-19 in their future classrooms. Of the 123 who provided written responses, 82 noted that their classrooms would include technological advancement. As a sample of their responses shows below, teachers recognized their ability to help students and parents further by incorporating technology in future semesters.

- “I will bring discussion boards back next year because it gives the thinking time and confidence to students whose voices may not be heard easily in class.”
- “I will use more of the Google Classroom and Google Docs for completion of ongoing projects. . . . I believe it will revolutionize my classroom next year and carry us further in our efforts to instill a self-worth, self-efficacy, and independence needed for my students who are cognitively and behaviorally challenged.”
- “[I will continue] assigning e-homework, collecting and grading it electronically. Many students who were not timely with paper homework were more punctual with e-homework, and most submitted the same or higher level of work.”
- “Prior to COVID-19, I never communicated with my students via email except for discipline. I found it a huge help to send my lessons, homework, encouragement, and reminders to the students. . . . I will continue to send them a reinforcement email.”
- “I definitely plan on continuing the FB group into next year. It allows me to quickly post anything that all the parents need to know without . . . having to message each parent individually.”



I BELIEVE IT WILL REVOLUTIONIZE MY CLASSROOM NEXT YEAR AND CARRY US FURTHER IN OUR EFFORTS TO INSTILL A SELF-WORTH, SELF-EFFICACY, AND INDEPENDENCE NEEDED FOR MY STUDENTS WHO ARE COGNITIVELY AND BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGED.

- “Unit-long (or even year-long) portfolios through a Google extension called Slip-in-Slide will become the norm in my classes. Slip-in-Slide allows teachers to insert new slides into all Google Slides presentations in a folder. This allows the teacher to add new templates, notes, prompts, or assignments to all of her students’ virtual notebooks with a couple of quick clicks.”
- “I’ve wanted to get better with flipped learning, and I believe making Loom videos to give students overviews of what they are doing/learning/focusing on before they come to class will be a very helpful addition.”
- “I will continue to use ClassDojo . . . as well as Loom and other sites to video lessons and use for learning purposes in my classroom.”
- “I’d like to continue providing prerecorded videos of math problems to students so that they can refer . . . to them after class.”
- “[I will] definitely utilize Google Classroom more! IXL will be ongoing in my class too!”
- “I hope to use more of the Google Forms and possibly Zoom for absent students.”

I MAY MOVE SOME ASSESSMENTS AND DISCUSSIONS TO A VIRTUAL FORMAT. THIS ALLOWS FOR A DECREASE IN ANXIETY AND A GREATER OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATIVITY.

Stronger in Assessment

Student assessment is one of the most difficult portions of a normal school year. Throw in a pandemic, and leaders scurried to implement appropriate methods of ascertaining student success. Teacher responses provided evidence of dealing with assessment professionally and creatively.

Question 7 provided options, including “other,” for teachers to select all the methods by which they assessed students during COVID-19. Of 140 respondents, 91 marked “virtual quizzes and tests.” The next most checked was “video responses” (59). Fifty-five checked that they had provided assessments completed in physical packets, and 49 checked “digital projects.” Thirty-eight checked “discussion forum,” 21 checked “physical activity completion,” and 10 checked “crafts.” Other checked options included “service completion,” “social media responses,” and “portfolios.”

Consistent throughout the survey, “other” responses were notable for their creativity. One assessment included “conferring with students via Zoom or Hangouts.” Another used “Nearpod; formal and informal ELA assessments; Seesaw: oral reading recordings.” To optimize content assessment another teacher stated, “All tests shifted from traditional multiple choice, short answer, true/false to pure essays.”

Teachers recognized the need to change assessment habits. A teacher later noted that COVID-19 “exposed how I rely on real-time assessment of activity comprehension. It has made me rethink how I perceive the way students will interact with an assignment or activity.” Another teacher found himself more ready to balance “the assessment for points versus actual engagement” and “ascending Bloom’s

Taxonomy.” Another “intend[s] to incorporate more daily assessments through virtual assignments. I also intend to discover alternate means of assessment through virtual testing because I believe it relieves the stress of the examination environment and especially because it can create more instructional time in the classroom.” Others found specific applications helpful. “While I will still require my students to present and discuss in the traditional classroom, I may move some assessments and discussions to a virtual format. This allows for a decrease in anxiety and a greater opportunity for creativity. For example, I had students read a story and summarize or act out the key elements through Flipgrid, a video-recorder for students. The result was beautiful, highlighting students’ gifts in drama, art, and wit.” As one teacher summarized, “I have had to re-think how to present/assess the standards my kids require. Having alternative methods virtually became a great option!”

Stronger Personally

COVID-19 made me a stronger teacher because . . .

Teachers finished the phrase, “COVID-19 made me a stronger teacher because . . .” in Question 9. Themes appeared, but none more clearly than personal reflection, pedagogical growth, and family understanding.

Personal Reflection

The phrases “it forced me, it helped me, it made me, and it prompted me” were often used as teachers critically assessed themselves. More than one teacher noted that it forced “me out of my comfort zone” to find paths to success. One respondent frankly stated, “I couldn’t rely on my personality or ability to ‘wing it.’” Some other responses of value are listed below.



I COULDN'T RELY ON MY PERSONALITY OR ABILITY TO “WING IT.”

- “It forced me to see what my strengths and weaknesses were.”
- “It taught me to be more adaptable, flexible, and compassionate.”
- “I had to be extremely flexible and patient.”
- “It required me to develop better communication and organizational skills.”
- “It helped me be more detailed in my planning.”
- “It required me to think outside the box.”
- “I was forced to become more creative and implement new learning strategies.”
- “It forced me to innovate and problem solve.”
- “I had to be more interesting.”
- “It forced me to think in unique ways.”

Most pointedly, one stated, “I had to stretch to become a new teacher after 20 years of teaching,” and this focus on teaching methods provided the next theme.

Pedagogical Growth

Though personal growth spills into pedagogy, respondents were quick to point out ways their pedagogy grew during this crisis. Most often this came in the form of technological growth as already described, but other responses are worth noting here.

- “Making the work meaningful and engaging took preparation that could happen spontaneously in the classroom (what questions to ask, etc.).”
- “I slowed down and took more time to look at individual students and their situations. I’d done this before, but I was forced to look deeper.”
- “I’m more streamlined in content delivery.”
- “I really had to dig down deep and think outside the box to keep my kids motivated and excited each day.”
- “It forced me to become more proactive about managing my students’ learning and encouraging individual growth and personal responsibility.”
- “It forced me to look at what is essential to learning.”
- “It forced me to assess my teaching and use different methods to communicate the lesson.”
- “It made me anticipate and address questions my students may have.”
- “It made me think of alternative ways of learning rather than just the lecture method.”

IT FORCED ME TO LOOK AT WHAT IS ESSENTIAL TO LEARNING.

One teacher provided an especially poignant response which represents well the responses of many others.

I believe it prompted me to continually ask myself the question, “How is this meaningful to the students?” In the traditional classroom, I think I may focus more on the question, “How is this relevant to the subject matter?” While the second question is valid and useful, when there is an overarching realization that students are individually “at different places” mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually—I had more of a desire to assign something meaningful and not just simply work to help increase their knowledge base. I am honestly not sure I succeeded in that goal, but this experience has given me a fresh perspective on student individuality.

THIS EXPERIENCE HAS GIVEN ME A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT INDIVIDUALITY.

As this teacher desired to understand his students “at different places,” so others agreed that their focus on students and parents grew substantially.

Family Understanding

Teachers readily responded that COVID-19 made them refocus on the needs of the student, the parent, and the home generally.

- “It forced me to think outside the box in how I was going to reach my students, grade them, and how I was going to stay connected to them and their parents.”
- “I have more compassion for my students’ mental health.”
- “I was able to understand my students’ struggles, and I was able to learn more about them.”
- “Our one-on-one Zoom times allowed me to get to know each child better and help each one with their specific struggles as well as encourage them further in their strengths.”
- “I was able to learn how to communicate with my students and their families from afar and still show them that I loved and cared for them.”
- “It helped me think more from a student and parent’s point of view.”
- “It required me to communicate and connect better with my students’ families.”
- “I realize even more the value of building and strengthening relationships with students and their families.”
- “I had to put myself into the position that their parents were in to take on ‘home schooling.’ I also had to deal more with emotional situations that we did not have to deal with at school.”

I FOUND DISTANCE LEARNING AS AN EXCITING WAY TO GET THE GOSPEL INTO MORE HOMES. I KNOW THAT MOMS, DADS, GRANDPARENTS, AND SIBLINGS WERE ABLE TO LISTEN TO OUR BIBLE LESSONS. WE CAN NEVER KNOW HOW MANY GOSPEL SEEDS WERE SOWN THROUGH THIS.

Stronger in Christ

Coming out of this crisis stronger took focusing on the Sustainer. Teachers repeatedly evidenced how this crisis increased their faith, some of which must be shared here.

- “COVID-19 is a great tragedy, but the way teachers faced it and overcame it to provide education to their students will never be forgotten by the families we were able to minister to.”
- “On a biblical basis, I found distance learning as an exciting way to get the gospel into more homes. I know that moms, dads, grandparents, and siblings were able to listen to our Bible lessons. We can never know how many gospel seeds were sown through this.”
- “I definitely prayed more for students and families than I ever had before.”
- “I relied on the Lord heavily to stay encouraged and then pass that encouragement on to my students and their parents as well.”
- “This was just another opportunity to teach in His strength with His wisdom and for His glory.”

Conclusion

U.S. Christian school teachers strengthened themselves during the COVID-19 crisis, perhaps more so than ever without it. They grew in technological application, pedagogical knowledge, communication, and self-review, with strength provided by the omniscient, always-good Provider. Another response offers a succinct conclusion. “My desire for teaching is renewed. After two months of separation from my students, I hope that I will value the time that we are given together and use each moment as a chance to influence their lives for Christ.”

Mark Zockoll teaches English and education in higher education while maintaining active relationships with the Christian schools that propelled him personally and professionally. He attended Maranatha Baptist University and then Salisbury University receiving a BA and MA in English, followed by a terminal degree in education from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. He currently serves as the digital media coordinator for the Maryland Association of Christian Schools and as the chairman of the Faith Baptist School committee (Salisbury, MD). He resides in Salisbury with his wife, Andrea, and their daughter Allison Georgia.

THIS WAS JUST ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY TO
TEACH IN HIS STRENGTH WITH HIS WISDOM AND
FOR HIS GLORY.

Reference

Map: Coronavirus and School Closures (2020, March 6). *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>