er priorities lower on the to-do list to the point they remained unfulfilled.

Then, on March 13, I said farewell to my students. They packed up Chromebooks, I cleaned out the snacks in my desk, and we transitioned to remote learning. Not only was I naive to believe that we would return in person after spring break, but I gave little thought to how my professional priorities would shift.

Initially, it felt as though the year might as well have started over. I had to figure out how to run virtual office hours via Zoom, record engaging lessons at the kitchen table through Loom, and give feedback through the side-panel “private comments” feature of Google Classroom. Adapting to new technology platforms for remote learning was jarring to the point that I put off thinking about what the priority should be as a teacher, novice or veteran, in this novel situation.

Now, however, nearly five months on, I have had abundant time to consider my priorities as a teacher. What I realize now — what I would tell a first-year teacher this fall — is that my priorities were flipped all along. Strong classroom management, planning ahead for lessons, and frequent feedback are all well and good, but they are no substitute for the relationships you build with students and families.

I wish I had sent those text messages home last September to build connections with families early. I wish I had spent that extra weekend creating relevant lessons that bridged academic content with my students’ lives. I wish I had figured out how to reach that one struggling seventh-grader so he could have been successful before and engaged in remote learning later.

The first year of teaching was bound to be challenging with a class of 30 12-year-olds. I could not have imagined how drastically my core beliefs about what it means to teach would have shifted this far in one year. As I think ahead to the first year of starting online, I have reconsidered what the priorities of a teacher should be. Stay connected. Keep engaging. Be concerned.

“Weeks and weeks of remote teaching and learning and mask-wearing made real life seem like an inescapable sitcom. With a dark soundtrack.”


Christian, Beckett (top), Berkeley, and Karla
Life-long educators
Granville, Ohio

So, how have you preserved the memories of teaching and learning from this past spring?

How are you holding onto the moments of your family collectively faking its way through turning living rooms into faculty lounges, flipping kitchens into science labs, accepting bedrooms becoming Zoom conference rooms?

Imagine an empty box.

Perhaps an old shoe box. Certain to crumble deep within the soil. Perhaps something more elegant, more refined; something worthy of being marveled at generations from now.

But I imagine a box. Empty. A time capsule.

It’d be something our family would methodically fill with mementos, souvenirs, and talismans from our family’s most unexpected spring.

I try to list the items we’d bury. Try to imagine the artifacts that’d mark the COVID-19 pivot from our family’s life attending the same beautiful school campus together in Texas before spring break to the awkwardly hacked home campus we rushed into service as teaching and learning went fully remote.
First, a for sale sign from the front yard. Our real estate agent put it in the ground the very same day that our city formally announced a shelter-in-place order. It mocked us. It felt like a bad omen.

We felt dread that nobody would tour our home, masks or otherwise. We imagined that the house would never sell; we’d leave it behind like dust bowl families long ago. We feared that we’d be jobless and homeless. After all, we had just given our notices to move back to Ohio at school year’s end. We gave notice only days before COVID-19 forced a run on toilet paper across the country. All job offers disappeared overnight. The decision was right. The timing, awful. Yes, we were still excited to “go home.” But with COVID and a mocking hourglass expiring, we were near-paralyzed by the path to get there.

Oh, and we had to quietly feel all of that without sharing with anyone we worked with or taught. We just continued designing curriculum, researching remote agile pedagogies and video methods, juggling hourly/daily shifts in class and meeting schedules, teaching courses, leading departments and divisions, collaborating with colleagues, future-contingency planning on the school leadership team, advising heartbroken 12th-graders, attending a tsunami of Zoom calls with parents, kiddos, colleagues, and outside experts willing to help our students, and keeping our house (and “homeschool”) perfectly clean for theoretical homebuyers that might ignore the city’s shelter-in-place mandate to come visit.

We were gut-punched that we had selected to change everything seconds before a massive pandemic and social and economic upheaval emerged. We were leaving jobs, titles, salaries, benefits, insurance, predictability. COVID mocked us. Kids and colleagues needed us.

We just crossed fingers and prayed.

The irony was laughable. The nervousness, not so much.

A ‘to do’ list. Into the empty box, a carefully crafted to do list. Written in mom’s handwriting.

It always began with a list of chores. Then school assignments. Followed by recommended hobbies and lunch-making tips. Finally, it ended with an empty checkbox, a “do something physically active” note.

And a red heart.

Each morning, we dutifully left our fifth-grade daughter and seventh-grade son a note for their day ahead. Yes, we were only rooms away, but we were also running a school, teaching classes, and trying to fake our way through flipping an on-campus school into a remote learning ecosystem. We had little time to see if our own kids were finishing homework, doing chores, or eating a balanced lunch.

So we left them a note.

And a red heart.

We wrote notes for them to read in their morning pajamas. A good morning. A plea to review email inboxes filled with teachers’ Zoom directions, assignments, and follow-up forgot-to-tell-you’s. A gentle nudge to eat fruit, put dishes away, and make beds. A plea that they juggle a soccer ball or shoot hoops or go for a long bike ride or even co-walk the dogs around the neighborhood.

And we’d add a gentle mention that doing homework didn’t mean it had to be done perfectly; grades wouldn’t really matter the same way anyway. There was now a do-no-harm school grading policy. We wanted them to show up and learn. We just no longer cared about grades point averages.

COVID certainly doesn’t care about grade point averages.

3.


Moment one: Our daughter climbs a tree out back during class time. Carefully places the bird’s nest high up in the branches. An art and science project. Carefully built from trash found in nearby streets. Impressive construction. Hands-on, experiential learning. School at its very best.

Moment two: Our pre-teen son stands eagerly at the front door during his reading time. Waiting for the mailman. Expecting a shoebox to be delivered. In it: a previously worn pair of “hypebeast” (aka: heavily sought-after; very expensive) sneakers he had just “won” on eBay. Planning to carefully refurbish them. Then post the pair on his new shoe resale business Instagram page. Instead of dutifully underlying history notes or typing an essay, COVID gave him space to start his first business at 13. Making money and keeping the mailman really busy.

Moment three: Our young daughter sits us all down at the kitchen table. Carefully guides us through a slow, finger-pricking process of hand-sewing DIY masks. The masks would let us go to the grocery store in a community slow to accept the changing world around it. Found myself imagining society forever changed. The power grid going down. Living off the land. A Little House on the Prairie family ready to hand-sew all that we wore. Led by an 11-year-old girl with common sense and a gentle touch.

Moment four: Our 13-year-old son hand paints a “No Justice No Peace” cardboard sign. School year nearly over. He had maintained straight A’s. Received several well-earned academic and community awards. But none of that seemed important. George Floyd mattered more. He held his sign above his head for hours at a busy intersection near our home. His first protest. No homework done that night. But plenty of “work to be done.”


Cookbooks, and board game boxes. Depending on the room of the house you’d walk through, you’d see cookbooks on every table top. You’d also see forgotten puzzles boxes. Board games from various closets. Shoeboxes.
And you’d undoubtedly see a laptop or iPad situated on top of any of those stacks. Whatever it took for your face to be level with the screen. It didn’t matter how you were sitting, standing, or laying. Just needed to be eye-level.

Screens filled with Zoom grids, Google Meet video faces, and Face Time laughter. Awkward beginning-of-class waves. Customary “can everyone hear me?” questions. Pondering which classmates had bad Wi-Fi or were falling asleep. Panicking that you had emailed the wrong video link the night before. Breakout rooms of kid teams brainstorming school projects. All-grade faculty meetings discussing kids falling way behind. Friday evening English department remote dinner parties. Admins crafting graduation events and lowering admissions rate contingency plans.

5. A DVD of NBC’s The Good Place. Sprawled across the couch, we’d laugh at the limitlessly comical reasons Ted Danson, Janet the robot, and mismatched protagonists remained philosophically imprisoned in the bad place. No plot or scheme changed their situation. Ironically feeling something similar. Weeks and weeks of remote teaching and learning and mask-wearing made real life seem like an inescapable sitcom. With a dark soundtrack.

We’d binge-watch Ozark long after the kids fell asleep. Roll our eyes at the annoying marketing advice from YouTube families making six-figures opening boxes of random items sent to them by advertisers. Play Minecraft, Roblox, and endless hours of Fortnite. Stare in awe at hours of Roblox, and endless hours of Fortnite.


Driving home, we’d sometimes wonder if we should quickly head to Sam’s Club to just-in-case hoard-buy cooking and cleaning supplies. Other times we’d daydream of selling everything, moving into an RV, just in case everything fell apart. More often we just felt gratitude to see our students and new friends: mask to mask, door to door, home to home, street to street, neighborhood to neighborhood.


There would be a photo of all four of us — parents and kiddos — sitting at the dining room table, attending four separate Zoom meetings at the same moment, none of us thinking it the least bit surreal.

But it was surreal.

And the new normal.

A photo of Karla dressed to the nines. Standing at a podium on the school campus. Leading a formal live video middle school awards ceremony. Her students in a grid of photos, lounging on their beds, attending from home, including our son on the same call up in his own bedroom.

A photo of our daughter in tears on the first day of remote learning.

She began with near Christmas morning excitement. Fired up for virtual school after an extended spring break to give teachers remote-teaching prep time. Wide awake. Pencils lined up. Thirty minutes later, she felt overwhelmed. Avalanched by loving, well-intentioned teacher emails. Filled with paragraphs of we-miss-you’s, remote learning advice, class expectations. More than a dutiful fifth grader could carefully take in. We hugged her deep. Told her to take a break.

It was day one of remote learning. Our lover of all things school was already drowning.

Also a photo of the four of us going on a long bike ride in the middle of the school day. We needed a break. School felt optional at times. Often. Even as school administrators and teachers and parents.

And a photo of us packing our house into boxes. Preparing to move back across the country. Uncertain employment. Uncertain social dynamics. Uncertain political shifts. And much uncertainty about whether school would ever return come fall.

And certainly many photos of us laughing at dinner time. Leading and attending Zoom classes in pajamas. School baseball mitts and travel soccer cleats gathering dust in the garage. Two dogs who never had so many mid-school-day neighborhood walks in their lives.