AMID CRISIS AND UNCERTAINTY, THE ED SCHOOL COMES TOGETHER (VIRTUALLY) TO CARRY ON THE WORK AND TO RESPOND TO THE CURRENT MOMENT

STORY BY BARI WALSH  ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN REA
In retrospect, it was clear that the novel coronavirus that had begun circulating and sickening people in China, starting in late 2019, would spread.

And yet the dizzying series of events that led us to where we are now — and have given the Ed School’s centennial year a far different flavor than we’d anticipated just weeks before — somehow still seemed to unfold suddenly, without time to adjust.

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via Zoom, the web video conferencing technology that has become the centerpiece of online learning at Harvard this spring. The TLL engaged with 75 faculty members during the week before the online transition, providing substantive consultation to at least half. Informal drop-ins were offered all day on each of the five days of spring break, along with formal training sessions on getting started with Zoom, best practices in online pedagogy, and how to transition final products, among other topics. The TLL even hosted practice teaching sessions using student volunteers, allowing faculty members to get a glimpse of what an actual online class would feel like. Zoom was already part of the university’s standard suite of work-based software applications—an easy-to-use solution for faculty seeking to bring virtual teaching and learning relatively smoothly.

The university. Help desk requests had already gone through the roof. On March 25, the Thursday of that first week back from break, Harvard hosted 7,800 classes on Zoom, with 87,000 participants across the country. The tally: “My classes have gone much better than I expected,” said Mehta, who found that “it helps to change up the rhythm. Take stretch breaks occasionally. Have everyone un-mute and let them answer a question or have a thought, and then they seemed to enjoy it; it lightened the mood.”

Many worried about how to preserve classroom community when few or no counters are small.” Se- nior Lecturer Carrie Conaway says, “and students said they were worried about losing the sense of community we had built. One idea I had for maintaining it was to set the Zoom for my synchronous classes to start at quarter past the hour and run 30 minutes past the end, with students entering automatically and unmuted. That way they can catch up if they were unable to close a approximation as I could create online.”

Other faculty use playlists to welcome students into the classroom, or they experiment with Zoom backgrounds or ask students what’s happening in their particular settings — connecting in ways that feel intimate and warm. With no “front row/ back row” dynamic in Zoom, faculty find that class participation has been rich, and that students are creating their own spaces for collaboration.

Faculty have been more intentional than usual about slowing things down to check in with their students — not only with master’s students, with scant weeks left in their Ed School experience, but with undergraduates who are likely to experience interruptions that could delay their academic progress; Ed.L.D. students (some of whom were in residencies when the outbreak that rippled across the field), and their own teaching fellows, who were being extended in new ways as they assisted with course logistics.

Fernando Reimers, Ed.M.’84, Ed.D.’88

The 74

students in the Ed.L.D. Program hosted a “Dig-
gin’ Deep for Diversity Dinner” series online. “We wanted the online social activities students started on Zoom as a way to stay connected.

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• Education Now (https://ednow/hkys), a new initiative that includes resources for educators, leaders, and families; a webinar series to share insight and guidance on navigating today’s complex landscape; and thought leadership from Harvard faculty about the crisis and opportu-

nities in education.

• The school and Associate Professor Sarah Dryden-Petersen, Ed.M.’20, launched a daily children’s book series called Books of Belonging, where Dryden-Petersen reads aloud books that give educators and families a way to help children process feelings and worries that may be relevant today — feelings of loneliness, disruption, loss, missing friends, and homes. The Books of Belonging series is posting daily on Facebook and YouTube.

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Indeed, students had to navigate breathtaking change — in their living situations (approximately 1.4 relocated to another city or country), their fi-

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A SEND-OFF, THEN ON TO A NEW REALITY

Lecturer HADAS EIDELMAN, ED.D.’14, wrote this essay after the last class before the school shifted online, and most of them said that it was “I was already planning for some sort of closure to our experience, but it was sobering none-the-less to realize that for most of the students there, this was a very poignant turning point in their lives.”

Matt Miller, dean for teaching and learning, had encouraged faculty to spend class time that day checking in with students, so I had planned to start class talking about how everyone was doing with the transition. If we also got some status content, then great, but we wouldn’t worry if we didn’t (and we didn’t). We had each student share:

• One thing they were nervous or worried about as we shift to online learning;
• A sight not often seen during the academic year; and
• A profound experience they’ve had in changing the grading basis of their classes.

“Those past few weeks have only further underscored the centrality of emotions and relationships in learning,” Associate Professor Karen Brennan says. “You’re not going to be ready to learn if you’re not in a good emotional place, which so many of us have absolutely not been. And if you don’t have relationships with and among members of a learning community, you have an extremely limited window into understandings of (and ability to be responsive to) the emotional landscape.”

As the physical campus became quiet, the school’s digital campus roared to life with virtual yoga classes, dance parties, mindfulness meet-ups, equity chats, and cocktail parties. Team Connect, a group of deans, faculty, students, and staff, launched a weekly crowd-sourced video series, a series of Ask Me Anything events with faculty, and the school’s signature community storytelling series, Double Take, to be held virtually in the spring. Using its convening power, the school quickly launched the more Leadership Series, a virtual speaker series giving students access to leaders from across education and beyond. The first guest, who appeared in conversation with Dean Long, was Paul LeBlanc, a remote learning pioneer and president of Southern New Hampshire University. Other scheduled guests included John King Jr., Darienne Driver Hudson, ED.M.’06, Paul LeBlanc, a remote learning pioneer and president of Southern New Hampshire University. Other scheduled guests included John King Jr., Darienne Driver Hudson, ED.M.’06, and Barbara Strickland, ED.D.’14.

With Harvard’s in-person Commencement postponed, and a digital ceremony planned in its place, community and connection feel even more essential, Long says. “In undeniable ways, this has been a time of sadness and disappointment. It is so unfortunate that we will not gather together in person for Commencement and all of the other events that make spring at most such a special time of year. Still, I have taken solace in being able to see many of the faces of my students, our alumni, and our colleagues — along with their children and pets — on Zoom,” says Long, who has hosted everything from casual coffee hours to informative community meetings to hours of planning meetings on that ubiquitous web platform. “We may be physically distant from one another, but this remains a vibrant, supportive, and resilient community.”

BARI WALSH IS THE DIRECTOR OF EDITORIAL STRATEGY AT THE ED SCHOOL. SHE WROTE THIS STORY IN LATE MARCH.