

May 19, 2020

Dear 8F families,

This afternoon, my good fortune finally ran out.

I've had a solid streak of success with technology during these weeks of statewide school closure. But today, Comcast workers were doing cable work in the neighborhood that kept cutting off the internet connection, so I could not lead office hours from my laptop. I tried for a few minutes with the Zoom app on my smartphone, but that quickly became too much to manage. On the phone app, I could see none of the students' boxes in the grid, so there was no way to tell who was/wasn't engaged. I asked a couple questions, but got zero response. (Could they not hear me, or understand me?) I swiftly decided to cancel today's office hours before unfairly taking out my frustration on the students.

So now I'm sitting in my basement, spending "office hours time" to write this long letter to you instead!

I am sure that you and/or your children have had a similar experience in the past 2 months – probably more than once! We ask the same questions: *What's the point? Why keep trying? Is it even worth the effort?* Sometimes we choose to persevere and do the best we can. Other times we have to stop and walk away, like I chose to do today. Maybe that was the wrong choice and maybe I should have tried a little longer.

This raises a larger point, that you and your children have probably also considered at least once. *Why continue to bother with schoolwork?* That's a fair question! The weather is finally improving, the novelty of distance-learning wore off long ago, and there are no official grades. Some students are clearly seeking the bare minimum to earn a "Pass" for our classes. They submit just 1 of the 3 tasks for a class, or rush through all 3 by Tuesday morning so you won't keep asking about their homework. They join the Zooms for attendance credit, but mute the device so they can't hear our voice. (That's right, kids, we know what you're doing!) A few others have been 'ghosting' us for weeks. Meanwhile, the majority of our 8F students have diligently attended Zoom sessions and submitted solid classwork week in and week out since March without a break. That's been an impressive achievement that we do not take for granted!

Really, though, why should kids continue doing all their schoolwork? In **some** situations, I honestly believe the answer is "they shouldn't". Many middle- and high-schoolers are caring for younger siblings so their parents can work. That is a hefty and valuable responsibility which we should encourage and facilitate for as long as it's necessary. Many family routines and roles have been jumbled and not yet replaced, so schoolwork may not clearly fit into teenagers' lives. I know from recent surveys I've conducted that the majority of my students are grieving lost relatives, fearful about losing others, and/or concerned about their parents' employment. Last week, 43% of 8F students reported they know somebody who currently has COVID19. I was crushed by these numbers as they poured into my GoogleForm, and they are still haunting me.

Yes, some students benefit from and crave the structure that schoolwork can provide, and we have seen some kids thriving under the current conditions, without being as overscheduled or distracted by peers. And yes, many teachers are providing some really cool and unique learning activities like at-home science experiments and virtual field trips. My colleagues and I are working and collaborating every week to squeeze all the lemonade we can get from this lemon of a pandemic. There is a lot of educational value available to students who can mentally access the material, and perhaps that is a good enough answer to the question “Why continue to bother?”

Here’s the part you really don’t want to hear, but if you read this far then we might as well keep going: *The start of the next school year will probably look a lot like Whatever This Is, folks.* Zoom is at least a part of the ‘new normal’. Gmail is the main line of student-teacher-family communication for the near future. Videos, podcasts, and other online media will play a large role in instruction at all levels, from college to pre-K. (My wife runs a daily videoconference “circle time” with her preschool students from a ‘recording studio’/office we created last month from a bedroom closet.)

Sorry, kids, I really am. But you gotta get used to This.

Whatever systems and skills and strategies our students can develop this month will certainly serve them well in the future. Maybe the content of our assignments doesn’t much matter (and we all know it’s not actually graded or scored), but the process and personal preparation certainly do. This is a great time for children to figure out how to actually use Gmail features, like labels and tabs (and emojis!) and respond to their teachers’ messages. If they can only focus on 1 class, then just be honest with the other teachers and learn the heck out of that class in the final weeks. And I definitely hope they can get practice to bounce back from setbacks, because we’ve got more of those to come. Parents: if you keep supporting us in this effort, then you better we’ve got your back, too.

On Thursday, I will re-open Zoom for ‘office hours’ and hopefully the wifi will be reliable again. If not, then I will try again with the smartphone app for a little longer than today. Perhaps I’ll have to surrender again and find another solution, which I may need to use in future to solve a similar problem.

8<sup>th</sup> grade *will* wind down for real next month. We will get some kind of a summer vacation. Meanwhile, I’ll continue trying to teach some things about the First Amendment, concepts of liberty vs authority, and minority vs majority rights. I am working to get a couple more guest-speakers to virtually visit us via Zoom, and otherwise make the most of my limited time with your wonderful children.

We really are in this together (apart).

Best wishes,

Andrew