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# GoToWebinar and TeachersConnect Create Engaging Distanced Learning Experiences for Students and Educators

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*Today's post is an interview with Dave Meyers, CEO and Co-Founder of TeachersConnect – a teacher-centric online community for educators. In the midst of COVID-19 and its effect on school closures, TeachersConnect has been using GoToWebinar to host several virtual sessions on how to provide powerful online learning experiences.*

*Read Dave's thoughts and insights on the shift from physical to distanced learning below!*

## **Q: How have teachers been handling this shift from classroom-based education to virtual education?**

A: Well, there are 3.4 million public school teachers in the US. I suspect the vast majority are handling the switch to virtual work in the same way the general population is handling it. In other words, it's a mix of the following:

- “Cool! An opportunity to learn and grow. I got this.”
- “Okay... but how do I change my son's diaper and explain the scientific method at the same time?”
- “I didn't sign up for this. I don't even have a space to work at home.”

However, teachers are dealing with a very unique set of challenges that are much, much different than those facing businesspeople. Here are some examples:

- **Distance-based learning was not part of the natural evolution toward technological use in schools.** Even teachers who'd be considered early adopters of technology – such as virtual reality apps, digital curriculum and teaching students to code – might have very little experience with video conferencing and online learning platforms. This is because, in most cases, the students and their fellow professionals are physically with them five days a week.
- **Their “classroom” environment has become complex.** This shift has evolved to include students, their families, the size and composition of their homes, as well as the hardware and Wi-Fi capabilities within them. While each of these elements has always been an important part of the educational landscape, the obstacles

have been amplified dramatically – and well before we’ve had a chance to mitigate them.

- **Teachers want make an impact on every student.** Any passionate teacher pulls into the school parking lot at the beginning of the day, takes a deep breath and thinks, “I’m going to get my students to love the Pythagorean Theorem today – every one of them.” But suddenly, some students are disappearing: those without Wi-Fi; those whose new priority is finding food; those who are babysitting younger siblings while parents go to work, and so on. It can be both frustrating and disheartening.
- **We’ve nurtured a system that is not suited for risk-taking or rapid changes.** Public education systems are woven with checks and balances: federal laws, state laws, local regulations, parent groups, media watch dogs, teachers unions, funding restrictions, the threat of litigation and lawsuits, and the ethos that every student matters. In the best of times, these elements protect students and teachers who might otherwise be forgotten or neglected. Now, in a time when all bets are off, educators at every level are facing the same demands, the same scrutiny, and the same personal desire to reach every student – but *without* the set of tools they’ve spent their professional lives perfecting.

### **Q: What are some of the key tactics you’ve heard educators adopt?**

A: Wow, where do I start with the creativity and persistence of educators? It’s nothing short of inspiring. Schools are meeting the fundamental needs of students and their families by prioritizing connection and access to the outside world. Here are a few examples:

- **Technology.** While Wi-Fi-connected personal devices are common in some communities, major gaps remain. According to the most recent Education Department data, about 14% of students nationwide do not have access to Wi-Fi in their homes, and [fewer than 10% of districts](#) report that all of their students have access to a device in their homes. Districts and schools have done everything from distributing existing devices, to purchasing new ones. As for Wi-Fi access, some districts have turned their school buildings into Internet hubs, allowing families to access Wi-Fi from those parking lots. Moreover, [roving wifi hubs](#) have even been set up in school buses!
- **Face-to-face check-ins and instruction.** In elementary classrooms around the country, morning meetings are a staple of community, relationship-building, and getting the students into the right mindset for a day of learning. In middle and high school classrooms, teachers are getting kids to rich academic work—in science, math, engineering—using items generally found in or around the home. Luckily, we’re seeing many examples of this communication continuing virtually through web conferencing platforms.
- **Time for students to interact without the teacher.** In the same vein, teachers are opening up their web conferencing platforms to allow kids to have social time

together – sometimes as teacher-led games with the entire class, and other times in virtual “breakout rooms” for a variety of structured or unstructured activities. We’ve even see teachers doing virtual recess.

### **Q: What are teachers’ top concerns right now? What do they need from their instructional tools?**

For starters, most of the methods and tools teachers are accustomed to using in order to reach every child (a gentle hand on the shoulder, science lab equipment) are no longer available. So, currently, the problem lies within finding ways to substitute this sort of intimacy and connection. But there are a handful of other areas paramount to the success of virtual learning:

- **Security:** A hugely important issue at the top of every educator’s mind right now. The systems must keep children safe from predators, the now infamous “zoombombers,” trolls, and anyone else wishing to cause harm or get attention in these online communities.
- **Reliability:** Educators and students depend on their collaboration tools to work when they need them. Dropped calls and audio issues are more than inconveniences. They’re deal-breakers. If teachers and students cannot get work done on their terms — where and how they want — it can and will have a devastating impact.
- **Simplicity:** The hardware and software should require virtually no instruction. They should be so easy to use that a child can navigate them with ease.
- **Social interaction:** For many students (even the ones who cheered when we were all sent home!) school is how they connect, socialize and build relationships. Now, literally overnight, teachers and their students became geographically dispersed. They can’t rely on facial expressions, body language or tone of voice that catalyzes the most memorable experiences. Part of the power of being in school together is that the learning is social. And the vexing question right now is: How can we keep the learning social when students and teachers are (at best) being piped in via live video?

It’s essential that software companies understand these challenges, and can help us replicate, or at the very least, preserve these powerful elements of education.

### **Q: What can teachers expect to learn in your next GoToWebinar? How can they get involved?**

The emphasis of the “Coronavirus Rx for Ed” open mic GoToWebinar series is “grab and go”. Our goal is that every teacher will get something – whether it be a simple tip, a technique, a tool, or a lesson – to use in their classroom the very next day. The presenters are largely classroom teachers who’ve been nominated by a colleague or

supervisor because of low cost, easily implemented and highly effective ways they've kept learning going amidst fear and general topsy-turviness.

## **Sign up for upcoming webinars with TeachersConnect!**

Register to attend one of the webinars below today! You can also [nominate a presenter](#), or [apply to speak](#) yourself. And don't be modest – we're all here to learn from each other.

- [Session 3: "Reaching Every Learner"](#) (Tuesday, April 28): Register now if you're looking to provide powerful online learning experiences to:
  - English Language Learners
  - Students with IEPs and other special needs
  - Students with limited access to technology
  - Students experiencing depression, trauma, or a lack of motivation
- [Session 4: "Collaborative Projects for Distance Learning"](#) (Tuesday, May 12): Register now if you're asking yourself:
  - How can I design collaborative work when the learning is online?
  - How can I get my students to participate in project-based learning?