



Transcript of episode 60, Is Online Education Our Future?

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:00:31] Welcome to our 60th episode, I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. As we know, 2020 has already sealed its position in the record books as one of the stranger years in history. But we don't always think about how things will change in the future. For example, education. Depending on what the pandemic looks like later in the summer and fall, there will be an impact on the next school year, whether it's a delayed start, or more online classes from home, or a different classroom setup, we'll be writing more new rules for education. On this episode, we'll talk about online learning. It's already happening in some private and specialized schools, and there are some college courses that require almost no on-campus presence.

Will we see a transition from classroom to Zoom? Jacqui Byrne is the founder of FlexSchool, a place where gifted and 2e learners can go for individualized coursework. They also have something they called the cloud classroom. We'll talk more about online learning and ways to prepare our kids for that aspect of future education today.

A reminder to follow our Facebook page Mind Matters Podcast, to keep up to date on what we're doing, and our Facebook group, the Mind Matters Gifted Ed and Advocacy Group, where we have ongoing conversations and you can get involved. Also hit us up on Twitter. It's @mindmatterspod. Jacqui, tell us who you are.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:02:32] Hi, I'm Jacqui Byrne. I founded FlexSchool, which is a network of small schools for gifted and twice-exceptional students. We have a couple of campuses in New Jersey and New York, and we have students remote in from other places in the world.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:02:48] Zooming the classroom, next.

(break)

Today, we're talking about twice-exceptional kids and the transition they've recently made to online learning. Jacqui Byrne, thanks for being here.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:03:55] Thank you, I'm really honored to be here.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:03:57] So to start, tell us how you got interested in 2e kids.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:04:02] First, I am a 2e kid, so that, well, grown up, I don't qualify as a kid anymore. And I have four children of my own and two of them, um, more than two are

actually twice-exceptional, but two were really flunking out of school in sixth grade. And I knew one in particular wasn't gonna make it through seventh grade without school refusal. And, that's rough as a parent and I was already in education and I knew all the local schools, but I didn't know them from the perspective of my own children and that changes things.

So I couldn't find a place for them because having high IQs and low grades is not a recipe for admission and financial aid. So that was a, that was a problem. And I didn't start out to, um, to open a school, but when there was nothing there and I knew there were a lot of other kids like mine out there, I, we started FlexSchool and the really exciting intellectual and creative side of this is that we didn't have to take an existing school model. We didn't have to take a traditional model and make accommodations. We could start with the kids and build a school around them.

And we've changed things over the years. We've shifted them here and there, but that sort of philosophy of the kids in the center of everything. Has come first.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:05:36] I love that about building the school around the kids' needs and looking at it through that lens.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:05:42] Yeah there've been some interesting choices along the way because of that. For example, as you know, gifted kids think they're smarter than you are anyway, and there'll be sure to tell you periodically. And you know, sometimes they're right. Sometimes, not only are they smarter, but they know more about the subject that you're teaching than you do. And I, I, you know, one of the things we look for in teachers is the, the ability to let the kids be smarter, to have the humility, to know that, okay, you're smart, but this child may be better able to understand this material. And how exciting is that?

And so we wanted to be able to express to the students that we respect them also, that it isn't a one way street. We don't have this situation where there's authority and you have to do this because I said so. Now, that's part of it, right? Teachers give assignments, et cetera, but we have the students call the teachers by their first names as a way of indicating to the students that we're going to earn your respect, just the same way that, um, you are going to try to earn our respect, and that it's not, it's not a situation where you have to respect us just because we're old. And that doesn't fly so well with these kids anyway.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:07:08] No, they see right through that. Especially, well, there are a lot of reasons why, but I think that our twice-exceptional kids are very, sometimes oblivious, but sometimes very perceptive.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:07:22] Yeah.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:07:22] Just depending on the situation. And they don't abide by all of those. common hierarchies that you see in, in typical schools quite often.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:07:31] Right. And we wanted to focus on engagement and academic progress as opposed to specific behaviors that give, especially 2e kids, a really hard time. Sitting up straight in a chair, keeping your shoes perfectly tied. You know, there are things that are challenges that you wouldn't necessarily think are challenges. And there was a

director of special services from a district walking through the school one day and we went by a room we call the fish tank, and there were kids everywhere. There were two teachers in there, one at the board and one sitting at one of the tables. There was a kid under the table, somebody else sitting on top of a table with shoes off, a couple of kids on a sofa, some other kids on bean bags. There were probably eight or nine kids in there and not a single one was sitting in a chair at that table. And the woman who was with me said, "nobody's sitting at their chair."

And I said, "no, they're not. But look at their faces." And every single one was fully engaged and looking at the teacher and, and actively listening. And so to me, that's far more important. And if somebody needs to walk in the back of the classroom, okay, get up and walk. You know, try to do it in a way that it doesn't drive someone else in the room crazy.

But everyone learns to be accommodating toward the other kids and their needs. Now I'm not gonna lie and say that that process is perfect and it happens immediately. That would not be true. But over time it does happen. And one of the students, one of the older students who had been with us for a long time said last year, "Oh, he drives me crazy."

And I said, "Oh, well, why do you think that is?" He's like, "Come on. I used to be like that. I already know this."

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:09:37] I've learned this lesson already.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:09:39] Right. Exactly. Exactly. And so it's, it's good.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:09:44] So the main part of our conversation today is really going to be about virtual learning for twice-exceptional kids. And I think that this is a topic, especially now as our world goes forward, that's really going to be very evergreen. It's not just necessarily topical related to the pandemic, but I do think it would be good for us to talk about how this changed, just as very abrupt shift in what's expected. How did your twice-exceptional kids at your schools handle this and, and how did the teachers handle it?

Jacqui Byrne: [00:10:18] We already have students, um, before COVID-19 hit and, and everyone went to remote learning. So we already had an online program where students elsewhere would remote into live classes, and they were just part of the class. We also had students who maybe had a chronic illness and had treatments once a week, and on that particular day, when they didn't feel well, they would join their classes from home.

So this was already a part of our experience and that was enormously helpful. And I'm so grateful that we did have this experience because it made transferring to a fully online program a lot of work, but it wasn't the same work or difficulty that it has been for so many schools, you know, I'll, I'll put that out there.

So our students and our teachers were used to this concept and used to having classmates who were in two dimensions instead of three dimensions. So now obviously it's a lot different from that because everyone is now in what we call cloud classroom. So, I think at first, the kids who had the most trouble were the kids who don't like change very much, but it was sort of a novelty, and it was going to be for a few weeks, and they'd see each other

again soon, and it didn't seem that rough. I think they appreciated the structure. They're still in class from eight til three every day. And they have a break from lunch and, and gym unless they have health class instead of, instead of gym class. So I don't think we really saw the strain of this situation for a few weeks.

Part of it came down to introverts and extroverts. Some students are thriving, they are so happy. And my own two children who are seniors this year are completely content. One takes classes from the hammock every day. Perfectly happy. And that's been an interesting dichotomy, the kids who are sort of going crazy in their own skin, sitting at home and not having kids to talk to between classes, and the other students who appreciate that it's quiet between classes. So that's been one challenge depending on the student.

And then as this has continued, we've had to make a lot of tweaks for the strain that this has put on the kids and one strain is, they don't like having kids stare at them all day. Some of the kids with sensory issues have this problem, but also there's an intensity to having people look at you or look slightly off, you know, 'cause they're not looking at their camera, they're watching your face on screen, so you almost have input from that person, but not quite. That has become overwhelming for a lot of the kids. So we had to talk to the teachers and figure out, okay, let's give the kids time off camera. We'll give cameras-off as an accommodation for those who need it, sort of alternate cameras-on cameras-off within each class to give them a break.

So that was one thing. And then, you know, we minimize homework anyway. And we're on a mastery-based system. So homework, isn't something we focus on. And we don't consider reading homework, by the way, just as an aside, most of the kids love to read or, you know, if they have dyslexia or something, they can listen to a book.

Um, it's been difficult though because kids who sit and look at the screen all day are not then very excited about looking at the screen for more time, to do any work. And my eyes are tired at the end of the day, the kids' eyes are tired. So I think we've had to adjust and remove work that we normally would have given the kids, or make more accommodations within assignments.

And it's a real balance. We don't want to go to pass/fail, and the kids are in school all day and I think they should get credit for having done so, and I think people should know that they've had a rigorous academic program this whole time. So we want to balance that with, the kids just can't look at this green anymore by the end of the day.

Now I'm sure by later they can play video games. That's a different kind of screen viewing, I guess. Um, so what the teachers have been doing is, giving the kids time to do work within class. Cause it gives them a break, both from the camera and from the discussions, which are sort of a hallmark of our classes. And they do work online, but again, intensity gets to be a little bit much when everyone's looking right at you, if you're having a disagreement within a discussion.

So the kids are doing work during class, and, you know, of course that brings its own challenge because if you tell kids, okay, you have 15 minutes to do the work now, they could

maybe get everything finished in 15 minutes, but they think, well, woo-hoo! I have a break and I'm going to go take the break. And then they end up with what they consider homework instead of an assignment that they could have finished in class. And then that's upsetting because they don't want to have to go back on to the computer and sign it.

So that's been interesting. Um, the other thing is that the social emotional aspect of, of supporting kids is really important to us, and it's just more difficult online. So we have social workers or therapists of one kind or another, you know, signing in and out of classes, checking in on kids, calling families if necessary. We've had a couple of meetings about particular students with all of the teachers, but it's a little bit more difficult to keep track of how they're actually doing. And we've seen an increase in kids who are not okay at home and still appear okay on the screen. And that's something that is usually true of students who are coming in, maybe they held themselves together in school and then they would collapse and act out or whatever it was that they would do at home, and those two sort of emotional states would tend to stabilize when we were on campus. That is less true now.

So one thing I would say to parents is that if it's hard for us in a small school, where we have someone dedicated to going into classes and to checking in on students, how much less data are the teachers in a larger school getting? And so I think it's become even more important for parents to advocate for their children and let teachers know what is actually going on and how they're acting at home.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:17:45] So it sounds like you guys were really in a good position to help your kids make that transition. They were already kind of familiar with it and the teachers were too. And then also being able to meet those social and emotional needs you're noticing is, is a struggle. What are some ideas just for online learning in general, what are some useful ideas for just modifying what would be considered typical curriculum? What obstacles do your teachers find in the way when they're trying to deliver curriculum through an online platform versus in person?

Jacqui Byrne: [00:18:15] I think the biggest issue is not falling into the trap of using what computers do really well. Like Cahoot quizzes constantly, and timed things, and what is the equivalent of a worksheet. And it's so easy, right? Those materials are all right there and you can set up a quiz quickly and it grades the kids for you, but it makes a lot of our students much more anxious to have things timed, and have it be timed in a competitive way. That doesn't usually work very well. So the same thing that you try to do on campus, create a community, and let the kids talk, have the discussions, those are even more important now than they were before because of the social emotional component. It might be more difficult for teachers, and that's the part where, you know, I'm, I'm loathe to say that because they're already working so hard and they have kids at home and they have other stressors, maybe somebody lost a job. And so it's sort of a tough time to say, "Hey, why don't you try something different?"

But I think that there are ways to change and we might as well change now since we're changing everything anyway.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:19:41] Yeah.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:19:42] If we're being forced to change, we might as well change in ways that are good for all kids, whether they have an IEP or they don't have an IEP.

Giving projects as opposed to tests. Or giving assignments where they have choices, so that they can choose how to present the material that they're presenting. And a lot of teachers do things like that, but they don't necessarily do them all the time, or instead of tests. But I think this is a good opportunity to see whether that works.

There was a sophomore English class a couple of years ago that was doing Dante's Inferno, and you could write a paper, there were a number of choices, and you can't always choose to get out of a paper. But one of the options was to come up with your own levels of hell, and the punishments that went with them.

Well, I have to tell you it's this took over the school for about a week. Fifth graders were coming up with levels of hell, and the kids talked about it incessantly. They learned more. From that assignment than they would have had they written a paper on one particular aspect of it. And not everyone chose to do that assignment, but because it captured all of the kids, they ended up doing that assignment whether they wanted to or not, because that was all anyone talked about.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:21:08] Yeah.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:21:08] So I really believe that this is a fantastic opportunity to change the way we look at academic material, and a lot of what is out there falls into the realm of online worksheets and quizzes and read this and take this quiz. But I think this is our chance to really look at our students and develop something else. No matter what you're teaching, what grade you're teaching, anything. Take Hatchet and let them read My Side of the Mountain also. And if you live in an area where they have yards, have them try to create a place where they could live if they were in the woods there. I think there are a lot of ways to take academic material and incorporate the students' own environment, and the discussions among the students, and have that represent learning that is slightly less difficult to quantify, but you can certainly see whether they've mastered something.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:17] I like the idea of changing it to fit the environment. You know, you have all of these other resources maybe that are available there, and finding ways to kind of get the kids engaged.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:22:28] Right.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:29] And I know, you know, it's interesting because, your student body, would you say a hundred percent of them require some sort of accommodations through school?

Jacqui Byrne: [00:22:38] We have some profoundly gifted kids who are accelerating through.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:42] Okay.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:22:43] And some students were quite anxious before they came, but they don't have the same level of anxiety. And so, what might've been accommodations originally, aren't, you know, they don't need those accommodations down the road.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:58] I see.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:22:58] But in general, what's not built into the environment itself we do accommodate with learning specialists, et cetera.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:23:08] As we go forward, I think the field of education has changed, especially for our kids who learn and think differently. And so I'm curious about what are some of the things that you've learned about providing those accommodations to those kids through an online setting?

Jacqui Byrne: [00:23:23] There are some accommodations that are relatively easy to translate from the classroom to online. Extended deadlines, extended time on tests, audio books, having speech-to-text or text-to-speech. Where things get more difficult is in instructional support and breaking down... let's say somebody has executive functioning deficits, and they are having trouble managing time and managing assignments in this new world. That's more complicated because there's no break between home and school. And while we kept the structure the same, it doesn't feel the same to the student because they have nowhere to go.

There are things that have shifted in their world enough that any structure that they had put in place to help themselves know what to do next and how to break things down into smaller pieces, those things seem to have left them, and it's almost as though we have to recreate the whole structure to support them. So that's been more difficult. And so if there's a student with, with significant EF issues in a classroom, that's definitely something that a teacher and a parent can maybe work together to try to figure out. We were on a call with some parents the other day and one of the therapists actually suggested, you know, maybe get in the car and drive for five minutes and come back, so that there's some sort of separation between home and the school day.

And I think there are lots of ways that you can do that. A place you're only in for school, et cetera, but a lot of our kids are lounging against pillows, they are sitting on the floor, sitting on a bean bag, my kid's sitting in a hammock, someone else is sitting at the dining room table and there are people walking behind. You know, it depends on how much space you have for all of the needs that are going on in the family. And because people are sharing computers, somebody is on a Chromebook, but then they're in an animation class, so they need the more powerful computer that the family has for that class. But the parents are online also.

I think that there are a lot of structural changes within the household and within the way a student approaches work that have to shift. And I don't think that there's a way to give a one-size-fits-all answer.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:26:09] What do you think will happen when some of these kids have to transition back to school?

Jacqui Byrne: [00:26:16] I think about that a lot, actually, because I'm trying to predict what's going to happen. And obviously the governors have a lot of control over what's going to happen. But when I think about the summer, we're having summer school online regardless. And then we're also hoping to do it in New Jersey. I don't know whether we will or not yet.

For the fall we're planning to be online, we're planning to be in person, and we're planning to be able to go back and forth between the two, to start in person and then have to quarantine again. And this isn't something that I talk about with students all the time, because I think that they have enough uncertainty and they've had to make so many changes right now, but it's certainly something that I'm thinking about.

And within that, how do we best support the kids in making those changes, and that disappointment that comes from being really excited to see their friends again, and then not being able to do so? And we have a few kids who may choose to say online, they like it so much. We have a prospective student coming in who has decided to stay online regardless of what we do next year.

And so I think that there will be a few kids like that, but for most of them, I think the transition back is going to be a little bit like the transition out. So on the way out, it was sort of exciting. And then reality set in and, you know, there was an increase in anxiety. We're seeing some increase in depression among the, some of the students. So on the way back in, there's the excitement of seeing everyone again, and then it's going to settle into school and it'll be like, they never left. And then the same things that, that were problematic before they left to go home, will be back, or maybe they'll miss being home and seeing their parents as often. And as one of the kids says, I get a lot of cat time.

And so I think that there will be things that they miss at home that right now might be making them a little bit crazy.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:28:39] Yeah.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:28:40] Change is hard and it's hard for all of us.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:28:43] It is hard.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:28:44] I think that there's going to be excitement and loss. I'm not sure how much excitement there was when we all had to go home. There was certainly a sense of loss, but I think that there will be both coming back, and it's really going to test the kids resilience if we're able to be back in person - which I so hope we are - and then we have to go again. This is a kind of resilience that is new for most of our kids and, and really difficult.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:29:14] Yeah.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:29:15] It's difficult for the adults too.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:29:17] It really is. Yeah. So as we wrap up, you mentioned those parents who are helping those twice exceptional kids at home. What ideas do you have for them? What words of encouragement do you have as they're kind of, they've adjusted, but

are still kind of trying to wrap their heads around all of this and figure out what's the plan going forward.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:29:38] It's really hard. And ironically, it's, it's less hard for some of the kids who are exhibiting less anxiety. It might be calmer at home, but for a lot of parents who don't have students who are in class, the kids who are getting packets for each assignment or each class each week, those parents are having to homeschool without a lot of support. And they also have jobs and probably other children. And I think give themselves a break. That the social emotional aspect of this is far more important than the academic realm.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:30:22] It really is.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:30:23] These kids will make it academically. They will find a way to learn what they need to learn, especially if they like it. There's that aspect of this. Um, but it's really hard. And I think if they share their own struggles with their children, that that will be better. And we had a town hall meeting the other day, and I said to the kids, "you know, You're not the only one struggling with this. All of the teachers are struggling too."

And I said, I can't speak for them, but I can talk for myself. I said, sometimes I get really fuzzy. Sometimes I'm, I'm really, you know, on top of things and I can move through things quickly, and other times it's like my brain turns to soup. And one of the kids said, "wait, teachers are feeling this too?" And he said, "I guess I could have figured that out, but I didn't."

And so I think it's really okay for parents to say, "Let's brainstorm ways that we can make this better for each other. What do you have to do? What do I have to do? And then let's sit down and talk about it. And if this doesn't work, let's figure out something else. Okay. Now we have more data. It didn't work. We can make a chart out of this. We can have discussions, you know, every three days or once a week." And just set it up so that there's the social/emotional conversation that's happening far more than the academic.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:31:57] I agree.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:31:58] It's not that I don't care about academics. I just think the kids who are struggling are struggling for social/emotional reasons, not for academic reasons.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:32:10] Jacqui, thank you so much for your time and all of your thoughts today, we really appreciate talking to you.

Jacqui Byrne: [00:32:17] Thank you very much for inviting me. This has been my pleasure.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:32:29] There's no question that online learning is going to be a much bigger part of the academic landscape in the future. How will teachers make sure their neurodivergent students are having their needs met? There will be some areas that are easy to accommodate and some accommodations may even be a better fit through online learning.

But there's going to be a learning curve as we encounter new struggles that we hadn't considered. Assistive technology has always been a consideration when figuring out the best

ways to help students with IEPs and 504s. I'm excited to see the future our students will have, as we explore the possibilities of online learning.

I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.

Dave Morris: [00:33:20] Our thanks to Jacqui Byrne. You can find out more about Jacqui and the FlexSchool at www.flexschool.net. Don't forget to check out our YouTube channel, where you can listen to every episode and find some extra features, like our recent education round table. The channel is at www.youtube.com/mindmatterspodcast.

We'd also like to thank everyone who sends us guest and subject suggestions. You can get in touch by going to our website, www.MindMattersPodcast.com, and clicking on Contact Us. For Emily, I'm Mind Matters Executive Producer Dave Morris, stay safe, stay healthy. See you next time.

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