Interview with Jeff Heyck-Williams, Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Two Rivers Public Charter School, Washington, DC May 2020

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Jon Snyder (Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education): Thanks for your time. Tell me the story of the transition from the things that you spent more than a decade creating and enacting in person in your school and then, within hours almost, tried to do at a distance.

Jeff Heyck-Williams (Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Two Rivers Public Charter School): I will tell you we're still making it up. We're trying to figure it out, day by day. Right now, we're in the middle of building an airplane that's in the air.

We got a good sense that we were going to close probably at the beginning of March. But by the end of February, we were starting to talk about it, because we knew it was imminent. We spent those first two weeks in March, when we were still in person, coming up with a plan for distance learning.

At that point, we thought we might be closed for a couple of weeks. We didn't know what to expect, really. So we had our elementary-grade teachers create packets to go home with kids. We have one-to-one computing in our middle school. So, our middle school came up with an online option on March 11. And we have one-to-one computing in fourth and fifth grades as well.…We amped up because we had a sense that we were going to close sooner than we thought. This was March 11, which was a Wednesday.

In two days, we surveyed all of our families about tech needs and ramped up the production of those packets. On March 13, the last day we were in school with students, we sent packets home with kids. We also sent lots of computers home with kids.

That was how we started our journey. And we thought we were going to be closed maybe to the end of April. Then, two weeks later, the mayor announced that we were going to be closed for the rest of the year. We realized that we needed to ramp up our digital and remote learning. So, we created what we call Digital Remote Learning 2.0, which had a more elaborate set of schedules for our elementary schools and new plans to distribute more technology to all of our students.

In designing the 2.0 plan, we started with, "In an ideal world, what do we want to actually accomplish and what do we want this to look like?" We came up with the three values as our guiding principles: connection, core content, and curiosity/creativity. We asked, "How do we help foster those three outcomes with kids in this space?"

Technology-wise, we're ensuring our kids have the technology and internet access. The city has had to really ramp up internet access because, prior to this, we have not had general Wi-Fi across Washington, DC. Trying to make sure that everybody has Wi-Fi was a big hurdle that we are still working with the city around, but over 90% of our families now have something. *(By mid-May, just after our conversation, Two Rivers was able to get hot spots to all of their families.)*

JS: How did you find out they didn't have access? Because, they couldn't write back to you and say, "I don't have access."

JH-W: Yeah. So, we started with that survey before our school closed that was electronic and through phone calls. When parents were picking kids up on that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday right before we closed, we surveyed them to make sure that they were on the list and had been contacted.

We've done two additional parent surveys since we've closed to get information. In both of those cases, we've set up phone banks. Anybody, any family, for whatever reason, that seems to not be responding to email or through their kids, we're trying to connect with in other ways.

JS: What percentage do you think you've been able to touch base with one way or another?

JH-W: We have 900 students. There are seven students that we have only had contact with two or three times. With the other students, we have been in contact multiple times on a weekly basis.

JS: A lot of work.

JH-W: Oh, it is. It's exhausting. When you are in person and can be with everybody, you can ask everybody to come to the same place to connect with them. The

virtual connection is something different. We can create some spaces, like morning meeting spaces where students come and gather, which are probably the biggest gathering spots online. We have those between three to five times a week depending on the age of the kid. We are…getting about 90% of our students, depending on the class, to come to those regularly. It's connection, right? One of our values.

But, it's with those 10 to 15% or so in a class that don't show up regularly that we have to reach out to individually. I think that's probably the hardest piece. We're mindful of the fact that our teachers, like our parents, have domestic stuff that they have to work on as well. They have people they're caring for at home. Everybody's life is different. But nobody has as much time as we did when we were in school together. So, it's just trying to find the right balance of time and expectations for how much people can make those connections.

JS: I'm intrigued by the fact that what you do in person took years and years and years, and it's intensely relational and developed over time. It's not just relational with the kids and the teachers, but among the kids and among the teachers. Then you had three days to do something. So, there's the three-day component and then there's how you do it when you're not together.

JH-W: Yeah. So, I'll be honest, we're not doing this. I think part of it is tailoring some expectations and one of the biggest expectations is connection. We care about connection. We care about those relational components of learning, the nurturing and growth of our kids. And that that was the number one priority.

Actually, that was the number two priority. The number one priority was making sure that all of our kids were safe and fed. So that is a whole separate bucket of things we have been working on. Making sure that that was done, that our kids were safe and fed. Then making sure that every kid was getting those personal connections—that somehow the personal connections were happening—more than just sporadically or once a week, but regular routines of connection. Setting that up and letting everybody know what those expectations were. It wasn't going to be the same, it was tailoring the expectation, but it was an expectation.

Then on the technical side, we bought zoom accounts and then had a PD day. We trained our teachers around how to run their morning meetings, community meetings, or crew meetings online. One great thing about Zoom is the teacher can meet with them, but learning etiquette and norms around being on a whole school or classroom meeting was a big piece. Part of that is helping teachers learn how to manage that. For instance, our elementary classrooms have a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. The assistant teachers can help manage the zoom account while the teachers are running a meeting or vice versa.

Also, we had to learn important stuff, like how to virtually allow kids to talk with each other, to just interact with other kids, and what kinds of initiatives really keep the connection and help kids normalize what is abnormal times for them. That goes from our littlest kids all the way to our oldest kids. That didn't happen overnight. That just has had to shift over time.

The one thing I will say is that our fourth grade and up kids are pretty tech savvy. They've used technology for project management and have been using tools like Google classroom regularly. So, this transition has been less bumpy, particularly for our middle schoolers, because they know where to find the tools and use them. The technology was enhancing to their work before and now it is more what they are doing, rather than just an enhancement.

JS: I'm just thinking about the emotional side of all this. You got kids that you don't know if they're eating. You have that level of concern. And then there's this machine that many don't really know how to use well. And, then there is your own family.

JH-W: Yeah, I live in Virginia and one of the things that I've talked with some of my colleagues about is that, in Virginia, we knew we were closed for the rest of the year by the end of March. DC slowly extended the closure and finally made that decision in the middle of April. It has felt harder on our school community than it did for my kids. My kids are still angry and sad and frustrated that they can't see their friends and they can't go out and play soccer, but we've had this period of grief.

That felt more protracted with the Two Rivers community, partially because we thought maybe there was some hope that we were going to go back to school before the end of the school year. It took a while for people to realize that we weren't going back. I have seen that from students to staff to administrators. Everybody is mourning that loss. But I think it did feel like a bigger loss because there was more hope for a few weeks.

On the technology side of things, really it was a challenge for our kindergarten and Pre–K teachers. We don't typically have our three- and four-year olds on the screen more than a couple of times a week during school. Some of those teachers are very tech savvy and some of them less so. So, trying to figure out how to translate what they do to a virtual environment has been really challenging. But, we have one Pre–K teacher who said, "We get together with the kids and say, 'Alright, so what are we playing today?'" Once again, it is about connecting.

My eight-year-old said to me the other day, "You know, adults can go get on zoom and talk. We don't do the that. I don't know what to say when we get on a call. When we get together, we just play."

I think that that's really a big part of it, figuring out how to engage kids in meaningful interaction. Any meaningful interaction through this kind of platform is

challenging—finding ways that kids can be their full, authentic selves and have, once again, that sense of normalcy. I think our teachers, for the most part have embraced that challenge.

I have a great team that works for me. I have two instructional guides and they both have been really thoughtful about meeting one-on-one with teachers to help them with technological troubleshooting. They've lots of experience coaching teachers in the past, but it is really different coaching teachers in this kind of environment, obviously, because it's really about how to get online and connect with kids.

JS: It's a transition working with teachers in a new way as well as working with kids in a new way. When you say "tailor expectations," how much have you been forced to back off, or back off temporarily, from those inviolable goals that you have for your kids and the goals that you have for yourselves as human beings with each other and with your kids?

JH-W: I think that we're still navigating that, but I will say that we've backed off a lot. One of the places that I think, as a leadership team, we have really struggled is, where do we back off and where do we not back off?

There is so much pressure in schools to teach math and reading right, that math and reading are the be all and end all of what schools should be doing. I don't disagree that those are important. But we have struggled to say, should we just be doing that and not paying attention to our kids, their curiosity and interests?

So, there's a healthy tension and trying to figure out how much we push on the reading and the math stuff that kids need and how much we really push on making sure that our first priority is that we're really connected. That really is our priority. But also, that our kids are meaningfully engaged and engaged in what they're interested in and care about.

There's so much we can control when we're in our classroom space together. But there is so much that is outside of our control right now. The way that kids experience the learning or the activities that we send out is a lot more open to the specific context of a kid's life right now.

So, I would say that our expectations are that we really tried to push us into connection in a narrow box. It is just really, really important to make sure that we're in connection, that connection is happening. Everybody has agreed on that and everybody is in a place of trying to create that space. This makes for the tension of how much reading and math versus just free exploration.

We're in different places. I feel like some teachers are doing really innovative and interesting things. Then some teachers are just trying to hold it all together. But that space for connection is first and we're holding fast to that. And then we're letting go a bit with some academics. We're letting go of a lot of things and saying,

"We're going to keep giving kids experiences with math and reading and experience around helping them create things." Those are still high expectations, but it's not particularly high compared to what we were trying to do before.

Another challenge is we are providing something and it's hard to tell what students are completely getting out of it. One of the conversations I've been having with our chief academic officer is how do we evaluate how we're doing. And we don't have a good answer for that right now.

JS: Sounds a little bit like 12–15 years ago—all this push on reading and math and tests and you're trying to do something more and different. How do you know how you're doing?

JH-W: Yes, absolutely. Starting over, but this time with a lot more kids and what feels like a lot more challenging environments.

JS: You've got your core values, expeditionary learning, thinking routines, curriculum and pedagogies, the assessments, and the seven structures and processes that support the work that you're doing. Are any of those things happening online? Can they happen online? It seems like some of that is just not possible. Or at least certainly not in three days.

JH-W: Um, no. So, here's what we are doing. We're doing a variety of different kinds of what I would call projects, but they're more open-ended projects for students. It depends on the teacher.

There's lots of interesting ways that content is being delivered to good effect. We have one teacher who's doing Geology experiments from her kitchen. You can share a video or there's a bunch of museums now that have open exploration offerings where you can do a virtual tour of certain exhibits of museums. Our teachers are accessing resources like that.

And then I have another a fifth-grade teacher who has her Genius Hour that is open exploration where kids choose topics. They have an advisor that is one of our other fifth grade teachers, that they meet with weekly to talk through where they are with their project. The major parameter around the project is that they have to synthesize their learning around some topic, and then they have to create some kind of presentation.

Those two pieces are the expectations around the project element that we've kept—the kids are synthesizing learning around some content or information and then they present it. That may be our preschoolers, drawing a picture and talking to their teacher on a zoom call about it, showing them the picture. Or it may be a kid creating a video using one of the video apps. There's a range or a large variety of different things that kids might do with that. Where in the past, we would have driven probably for deeper content knowledge and more of a writing component.

We've let that the writing piece go a little bit, although some, I think in our middle school, they are still asking all of their students to have a written reflection piece with their synthesis.

JS: Specific to assessment. There are so many unknowns. How do you know? How do you try to learn enough about your kids? I assume you knew them well before they left to be able to fill in some of the gaps.

JH-W: Yeah, that's the million-dollar question, How do we know if what we are doing is effective or not? How do we know where any individual kid is and what they are doing?

First, I can talk about some of the bright spots. I feel like one of those things is the Genius Hour—having a teacher connect one-on-one with a kid. This works as a good assessment because that teacher can have a good idea of what a kid knows and what a kid has been doing, because they're having a conversation. In the Genius Hour, it's around a topic that the kid chooses, so there's some motivation there. And then the teacher can help troubleshoot—like asking "What are ways for you to deepen your knowledge, and then what are ways for you to share your knowledge?" Those are the two strands that we're hoping the kids take up and grow and develop.

Second, state testing has been canceled everywhere. Hallelujah. And as a network we are still looking at whether there any network-level assessments to give. I think the answer is probably not until the fall. That's where we are currently. We're not doing performance assessment right now.

We are pushing out some course-based assessments in our middle school through Edulastic, which is more like a traditional kind of test. Our middle school math program is through Carnegie Learning (https://www.carnegielearning.com) and they embed Edulastic assessments (https://edulastic.com) into their online platform. So, we've used Edulastic to build out math literacy. They have question banks and, in the case of Carnegie Learning, they have the actual assessments that Carnegie built into their assessment tool, but then you can also create your own questions.

JS: This is an example of tailoring your expectations because of a brave new world?

JH-W: Oh, absolutely. We use assessment data in so many different ways that we're thinking about what the biggest levers are and the things that we actually need data for right now. A big one is: How effective is what we're doing? The other is: Where do we go from here with our kids? This is the assessment for learning piece. How do we help chart a path forward?

For instance, what is next year going to look like? Or what is the summer going to look like? That's where we are hoping these Edulastic assessment tools are going to give us something to start with. They're not the same as the NWA map assessment (https://www.nwea.org/map-growth) we normally use as part of our

process. (We are not able to use that this year.) Then our younger grades have used something like the DIBELs assessment ([Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills: https://dibels.uoregon.edu/assessment/dibels](https://dibels.uoregon.edu/assessment/dibels)). They're pushing out a version of it that can be given virtually, but I just don't know how you give a reading assessment with a five-year-old online; it just seems terrible.

JS: What are the key lessons for you to think about as you move forward? If you had any advice to folks, what would it be?

JH-W: This is why I'm in education. I feel like you want to think about, "What is your why? Why are you doing this?"

For us, we have a mission that we feel very strongly about. And I feel like that is guiding us even in this moment. It is about nurturing a diverse group of students to become lifelong learners, and I think articulating that is really important. Yeah, you have to tailor your expectations. But even when you are tailoring your expectations, you should be tailoring them with that "why" right in front of you. So that you're not letting the technical challenges that you have to deal with get in the way of you compromising your mission.

We're making lots of compromises, but we've decided that the thing we're not compromising is the relational component of what we do in as much as possible. That is the first thing that we're trying to make sure happens. The other stuff follows from there.

Then, in an ideal world, I think we are going to find ways to gather data around how well we are doing that right—how well we are connecting with kids, and how well our kids are growing and becoming excited about learning. How do we design and fail and try to figure out how to get better at meeting our mission. My biggest fear right now is that we're losing kids.

JS: I've read about what you've done over the decades and it was about that mission, about the kids, about all the kids. And everything came out of that mission—the thinking routines, the assessments, the pedagogy. And then you kept asking yourself, "How do we know how we're doing? Because we can do it better, because our kids deserve better." That's my take-away from your history and it sounds like that's what you're trying to do now with a whole new set of challenges and three days, rather than 15 years.

JH-W: Yeah, well that is absolutely right, and I'm still hopeful. I know that we're headed into, are already in, the midst of a very challenging period that is not going to end in the next year. I think it's going to be a long, long road, and I am afraid it will exacerbate inequalities. We're going into an economic downturn that is going to hit schools really, really hard and that is going to further exacerbate those inequalities.

So, how do we hold on to a vision in which we create schools that are an important part of creating a more just and equal society. Hopefully we can continue to drive towards that. I think that we can. I know that it's going to be really challenging. But, working in this field and at Two Rivers in this community, I feel like we have had some success, and I feel like we will in the future as well. That really does mean holding on to your core values and not turning away from those.

JS: I greatly appreciate your time and it's always inspiring to hear you and what you're doing and how you're always trying to get better. So, thank you.